

A SERIAL STORY BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS BEGINS NEXT WEEK.

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THERE IS A SECRET IN MRS. SEAGRAVE'S PAST WHICH SHOULD PREVENT HER FROM BECOMING THE WIFE OF ANY HONEST MAN," SAID MISS SANDFORD, DRAMATICALLY.

## HESTER'S SECRET

[NOVELETTE.]

COMPLETE IN THIS NUMBER.

By the Author of "A Golden Destiny," "The Mystery of Lennox Court," "The Ivy House," etc., etc.

**T**HE world—or, rather, that portion of it in which she moved—agreed in giving the Honourable Mrs. Mainwaring credit for being an excellent manager. As to her other qualities, good bad, or indifferent, society held its own opinions, and maintained a discreet silence. Everybody,

however, was aware that her income could not exceed five or six hundred a year; and as she lived in much the same style as some of her neighbours with double that amount, the logical inference was that her capacities as a financier must be beyond dispute.

It is true Beechwood was her own, but Beechwood was a moderately large house; and her relations, who were generous in the matter of advice, often hinted that it would fetch a pretty high rent, and add considerably to her income if she would consent to let it.

To these suggestions she was deaf. She knew better than anyone could tell her the value of living in a good house, and keeping up an "appearance"; and her mind was made up not to quit Beechwood until her two daughters were settled and off her hands—an

end which she always kept steadily in view, and worked for with an energy and perseverance certainly worthy of a better cause.

On this particular morning Mrs. Mainwaring and daughters are in the morning-room, hard at work on a new dress which is to be worn by the younger girl this afternoon; but Beryl, though she loves new dresses, does not love the general topsy-turvydom which making them involves, neither is the odour of slate-coloured lining delectable. Besides, the sunshine is so bright out-of-doors the air so soft and warm; and through the open casement she catches a distant glimpse of the river, breaking into sun-kissed dimples, and presenting a distractingly inviting appearance.

Beryl throws down a sleeve, and follows it desperately with her thimble.

"There, mamma, I've done! Garden party or no garden party, I can't work any longer. I feel just like the woman in the song of a shirt—my very pulses are beating in stitches! If the worst comes to the worst, I must go to Mrs. Lepell's in a Turkish towel and a turban. I should be quite sure of attracting attention then; and, after all, that is the result for which one toils. Good-bye. I'm off to the river."

There could be no manner of doubt as to the wisdom of her choice. Drifting idly with the stream, in a light little skiff, between banks lovely with seeded grasses, blue-eyed forget-me-nots, and tall, fragrant meadow-sweets, is a singularly pleasant way of spending a summer morning; and, it must be confessed, Beryl Mainwaring looked very much in harmony with her surroundings.

She was a small, fair, rosy-cheeked girl, pretty after a saucy, piquant fashion, and with a plump figure, very becomingly clad in a pink cotton gown, in the belt of which she had pushed a large bunch of red carnations.

Holding the sculls loosely in her hands she let herself drift along until she was roused from her *dolce far niente* state by the sudden appearance of a small canoe, which shot out from under the shadow of some willows with a highly suspicious promptitude.

The occupant of the canoe was a young man of five or six-and-twenty, with a frank, boyish face, blue eyes, and very close-cropped brown curls—decidedly a prepossessing young man, who brought himself alongside the skiff with much skill and then wondered whether it was the shadow of her pink-lined hat that lent such an altogether lovely glow to Beryl's face!

"Dear me, Mr. Muir, is it really you? How funny that you should happen to be on the river just now!"

Mr. Muir agreed that it was funny, and went on to observe, with the air of a discoverer, that such coincidences did occasionally happen, without, however, thinking it worth while to mention that he had been smoking cigarettes under the willows for the last hour and a half, in the wild hope that the younger Miss Mainwaring might, perchance, pass by.

"It is so pleasant over there, just by the bank," he remarked, keeping his hold on the gunwale of her boat in a preoccupied fashion. "Won't you come and rest for a few minutes?"

"Oh! I haven't long been out, and I don't want to rest, thank you," very demurely.

Charlie Muir looked disappointed; then a truly brilliant idea struck him, and he leaned a little nearer to her to impart it.

"You said the other day you wanted to see a kingfisher. Well, while I was waiting, I did see one, and I daresay he'll come again if we are very quiet."

"Do you think so?" doubtfully.

"I'm sure of it," with unabashed conviction. "Come along; I'm certain you'll like it."

Beryl allowed herself to be persuaded, making it, however, distinctly understood that the kingfisher was responsible for her change of mind. Once in the cool green shadow of the long-tressed willows she seemed in no special hurry to get away, and even the kingfisher was forgotten in the interest of her conversation with Charlie Muir—a conversation none the less fascinating because it made no special demand on the intellect of either.

Presently they drifted into silence, Beryl employing herself in minutely dissecting one of her carnations, while her companion seemed perfectly happy in watching her busy little white fingers.

By-and-by he broke the silence very softly. "I say, Miss Beryl, I'm so awfully glad I met you this morning, you know."

"Are you?" with a coquettish glance from under the pink-lined brim of the straw hat—a perfectly distracting glance, he found it.

"It seems quite long ages since I had the chance of speaking three words to you."

"Does it?" again said Beryl, wisely confining herself to vague queries.

"I tried so hard to get to you the other night at the Sinclairs," the young man went on, with a quite pathetic inflection in his voice; "but, somehow—I'm sure I don't know how—I hadn't a single chance of speaking to you."

Beryl did not venture on any reply this time, being fully aware that her mother's clever manoeuvring was answerable for poor Charlie's complaint.

Mrs. Mainwaring was quite willing to see her youngest daughter engaged, but solely on condition of the *fiancé* being a rich man!

Unfortunately Charlie Muir did not fulfil this condition. He was not even a younger son, but occupied a position one degree less eligible, inasmuch as his parents were dead, and he was the younger nephew of the uncle who had adopted him and his brothers.

Beryl, of course, with the vexatious frivolity of extreme youth, declined to let her sentiments be influenced by such minor considerations as filthy lucre or its absence, and Beryl was inclined to be very indignant with her mother on account of the tone she took towards Charlie.

Perhaps it was for this reason that her eyes grew softer as they rested on the young man's honest, kindly face; but surely there must have been some other and more cogent one that brought the warm blood to her cheek in such a carmine glow when his glance suddenly met hers.

"Are you going to Mrs. Lepell's garden party this afternoon?" she asked, in quick confusion, and lifting her mutilated carnations to her pretty little "tip-tilted" nose, so that he shouldn't get a complete view of her red cheeks.

"Yes; and you?"

"Oh, we are all going—mamma, and Hester, and I."

"I hear the new tenant of the Hermitage is to be there. Lepell, who has called on him, says he is a very nice sort of fellow."

"What's his name?"

"Wharton—Colonel Alec Wharton. He has just returned from India on furlough."

"Alec Wharton!" Beryl repeated, with a little start. "How funny!"

"What is funny?"

"Nothing—life in general," she answered, with a change of tone. "The fact of my staying here so much longer than I intended, if you like; and that reminds me, I really must go."

"Go!" in an accent of keenest surprise.

"Why, you have only just come!"

"I have been here exactly three-quarters of an hour, which may be a long time or a short time, just as you please to regard it. My mother would say it was long."

"And you?"

But Beryl declined to commit herself, except by a coquettish smile, which the young man thought extremely bewitching; and then she turned the nose of her boat round, took the sculls in her strong young hands, and was soon pulling vigorously up stream.

As she neared Beechwood her face grew much soberer—so sober, indeed, that her sister Hester, who was waiting for her on the bank, wondered what had happened. Hester herself was often serious—some people called her melancholy, but the word was misapplied.

She was very young, only just twenty; but already there was upon her face something of the unrest that comes from a sad experience—tempered, at the same time, by a certain sweet tranquillity which involuntarily called to one's mind the tender grace of Raffaele's Madonnas.

Her figure was tall and slender, and instinct with a dignity that Beryl often envied. Hester generally dressed in black; and, curiously enough, the sombre colour suited her, showing up as it did the exquisite delicacy of her pure, flower-tinted complexion, and lending an added lustre to her violet eyes—eyes deep and velvety as purple pansies.

"Hester, darling!" Beryl said, as they walked up the lawn together. "I have news for you—very surprising news."

"And from whom did you learn it, pray? Not Charlie Muir, I hope!"

"Well!" with a fine assumption of candour, "it was from Charlie Muir; but how you guessed it I'm sure I can't imagine. The new tenant of the Hermitage is—whom do you think?"

"How can I possibly tell? I know nothing of Mr. Muir's friends."

"It is one of your own friends—at least, not quite that, but, at any rate, someone you are interested in—Alec Wharton!"

Hester came to a sudden pause. All the sweet red colour left her cheeks, to return to them in a deeper flood. Her fingers twisted themselves nervously one in the other, and she slipped a plain gold ring which she wore on the third finger of her left hand up and down with such uncertainty that it presently fell off and rolled down to the bank.

A little cry of dismay escaped her lips. She made a quick movement forward, but it was too late—the ring had rolled down to the river.

"There!" exclaimed Beryl, after a moment's surprised silence. "If I were superstitious I should say the loss of that ring was an omen!"

"An omen of what?"

But with a prudence beyond her years Beryl maintained an oracular silence. In prophesying future events it is always desirable to stick to vague generalities, and then you are seldom liable to be confuted.

"It is a great nuisance!" said Hester, presently, "for I don't see how I'm to get a ring by this afternoon."

"Do without one," her sister suggested, with cheerful promptness. "If you put two or three other rings on the same finger no one will notice your loss!"

Hester made no comment; in point of fact, her thoughts had lost themselves in past memories evoked by the mention of Alec Wharton's name. She had never seen him, but, all the same, he had exercised a very considerable influence over her life in the past, and a meeting with him suggested many puzzling thoughts as to the future.

Her white brows were knitted together in perplexity as she came up the lawn towards the French window of the morning-room, where her mother was standing watching her. A little sigh broke from Mrs. Mainwaring's lips, and she turned away half-impatiently, as if there were something in Hester's aspect that hurt her.

So, indeed, there was. The shadow of an irrevocable past fell between her and her daughter, blotting out the sweetness of Hester's face behind a cloud of sin and sorrow, from whose dark influence there was no escape.

The girl came in alone, and her mother caught her face between her hands and kissed it tenderly, almost passionately.

"You know I love you, Hester! my dearest! my first-born!"

"How could I doubt it, mother dear?" Hester returned, gently, but in some surprise.

"It is possible that you might," Mrs. Mainwaring said, restlessly. "Youth is impetuous, and judges from its own small experiences; and I know that I am principally answerable for your marriage. But I did it for the best, Hester. I had no other motive than your welfare, my child!"

"I know it," the young girl answered; but a sudden coldness had fallen upon her, and betrayed itself in her voice. "Why should you speak of this now?"

"I don't know. The thought came to me involuntarily, and forced the words from my lips."

"Strange!" Hester murmured, rather to herself than to her mother. "I came to tell you that Alec Wharton was in England, and would be at Mrs. Lepell's this afternoon."



## CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Lepell was the happy possessor of a large, rambling, old-fashioned house, and an equally large, rambling, old-fashioned garden—a garden that looked its best this afternoon, with groups of gaily-dressed people dotted over the velvet smoothness of the lawn, and a sky of unclouded azure spreading its canopy above.

By-and-by the group moved off. The frivolities in the shape of fruit and ices were superseded, and the real business of the afternoon—tennis—began.

Sets were formed, and those misguided people who neither cared to play nor to look on wandered about the grounds at their own sweet will.

Of course Beryl Mainwaring wielded a racquet, but Hester had ceded her place to someone else, and now stood under the shadow of a Spanish chestnut, looking entrancingly sweet and fair in a thin black dress, with a few knots of lace and delicate violet ribbon about it.

One of the guests, a stranger, was looking at her with an absorbed attention that would have been rude if it had not been *naïf*.

He was a tall, dark, soldierly-looking man, with broad shoulders, a bronzed skin, and a heavy, dark moustache; not specially handsome, perhaps, but with a marked individuality about him that inevitably challenged attention.

Presently he went up to his hostess, and said a few words to her—apparently a question—to which she at once gave an affirmative answer. Then she led him up to Hester, and introduced him rather hastily, for there was a dreadful vision in her eye of a footman looming in the distance armed with the tea tray, and Mrs. Lepell had distinctly said the tea was not to be brought out until half-past four.

"Hester, my dear, allow me to present Colonel Wharton. Pray excuse me—a hostess has to be in five places at once!"

She disappeared; and, if the notion had not been so utterly absurd, Colonel Wharton would have fancied that his companion was agitated.

Certainly she grew paler, and a half-questioning, half-apprehensive look came in her eyes.

With a quick gesture she put her hand to her lips—it was a trick of hers when at all excited, as he learned afterwards.

At this moment the only thing that struck him was the beauty of the hand itself, with its long taper fingers and pink nails.

It was the left hand, and on the third finger were two or three valuable gem rings.

In a minute or two Hester recovered her composure, and made room for the soldier on the rustic seat where she was sitting.

"Do you care for watching the tennis?" she said, with her gentle, gracious smile. "We can get a good view of the play here, and it is likely to be good, I think!"

He accepted the seat.

"You must be kind enough to tell me who the players are," he said. "I am a perfect stranger, and know absolutely no one except our host and hostess."

She was looking at him with undisguised interest.

"But you know the country well?"

"No. This is my first visit to W—shire, although I am now an inhabitant. Perhaps," he added, with a smile, "you may wonder why, being in such a condition of ignorance with regard to its surroundings, I took the Hermitage! The fact is, I wanted quiet and country air, and both these essentials were to be procured here, so when I chanced to see my little shooting-box advertised in the *Field* I promptly took it."

"It has been empty some time."

"I am not surprised to hear it. The house is not in what may be called a satisfac-

tory state of repair. However, it is water-tight, and that is about all I require."

"And are you not afraid of being dull?"

He laughed, as if the notion amused him.

"Oh, no. I am so used to my own society now that it seldom bores me. Besides, I am an ardent sportsman, and as soon as September comes I hope to get some decent shooting."

"Are you going to stay here long, or do you intend returning to India?" she asked, after a pause, faltering in her tone as she put the question.

"I think I shall go back before Christmas. I have nothing to keep me in England—no relations, and few friends."

"That sounds sad," she observed.

"It feels sadder than it sounds," he returned, rather grimly. Then he sighed. "But what can you expect? I have been away for ten years, and many changes are effected in that time. Old friends have married, or died, or emigrated—a fresh generation has sprung up; even the familiar buildings have been swept away, and the place I left vacant when I sailed for India has been filled long ago. It is a little humiliating to find one's identity such a very trivial matter to the world at large, isn't it?" he asked, with a rather joyless smile.

"I sometimes wonder whether it was wise to come over from India at all—whether it would not have been better to preserve the old illusions, that lent a sort of poetry to life, rather than deliberately assist at their destruction. But I am sure I don't know why I should bore you with my grievances. I was led away by my subject—and selfishness."

"Indeed, you don't bore me. I like hearing all you will tell me!" Hester exclaimed, eagerly and earnestly—so eagerly that he looked a little surprised at her warmth.

The afternoon wore on. The birds twittered lazily in the branches; the butterflies, like winged blossoms, hovered lightly over their sisters in the borders; the big, velvet bodied bees hummed noisily past on their way home, honey laden.

The set at tennis was over, and the players had wandered off, mostly in couples; gay laughter floated on the soft summer air to the two under the Spanish chestnut, but they made no attempt to move. Colonel Wharton was describing to Hester some wonderful blue lotus he had seen growing in India, and she expressed a desire to see it.

"I can't show you the flower itself," he said, with a smile that made his dark face very winning, "but I can let you see a painting of it if you like. May I call on you and bring it with me?"

"Yes, do!" she returned, and he did not notice the pause between his question and her answer—if he had it would have told him nothing.

"You go on the river occasionally?" he said, changing the subject.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Because I saw you a few mornings ago. I was behind some bushes, fishing, so you didn't notice me."

He did not add that the lovely, spirituelle face had taken such a hold on his imagination that he had not been able to rid himself of it. It had haunted him night and day with a pertinacity that astonished, as much as it annoyed him; and he had come to the conclusion that the only way to exercise it would be to see it again. Not very logical reasoning, perhaps, and a little open to the charge of sophistry.

But our Colonel was no sophist, and he acted in the purest good faith in accepting Mrs. Lepell's invitation to her party, for he thought that amongst her guests he would very probably see the owner of those sweet, dreamy eyes, that had a knack of forcing themselves into his dreams even.

Hester had no time to make a comment on this communication, for at that precise juncture Mrs. Mainwaring made her appearance, rather more flushed than usual.

"My dear Hester! I could not make out what had become of you. I have been search-

ing for you all over the garden without success!"

Mrs. Mainwaring spoke with a considerable degree of asperity, for not only had she lost her elder daughter, but—what was infinitely more annoying—her younger one also. And this was not the worst either, for when last seen the misguided girl had been in the ominous company of Mr. Charlie Muir!

Hester rose immediately, a delicious pink colour in her cheeks.

"I have been with Colonel Wharton, mother, and the time passed more quickly than I was aware. I am sorry you missed me. Let me," turning to the soldier, and speaking a trifle unsteadily, "introduce you. Colonel Wharton—my mother, Mrs. Mainwaring."

Mrs. Mainwaring bowed, but her flush gave place to a far less becoming paleness. Colonel Wharton hastened to fill in a pause, that threatened to become awkward.

"I fear I am to blame for keeping your daughter so long. Miss Mainwaring was kind enough to compassionate my loneliness as a stranger."

"Miss Mainwaring!" repeated the elder lady, below her breath, and without recovering the *sa voir faire* that usually distinguished her.

Colonel Wharton looked a little bewildered at her expression. He was glad of the diversion which was opportunely effected by the sudden presence of Mr. Lepell on the scene.

"Will you come and have some tea?" said the host, offering his arm to Mrs. Mainwaring. "We are having it under the copper beech. Hester, you will follow with Colonel Wharton."

Colonel Wharton took her as far as the lawn, but he got no other chance of speaking to her, for she was immediately claimed by two or three girl friends, and he thereupon retired into the background, watching her quietly, and wondering how it was that every movement possessed such a charm for him. Poor man! Famous soldier as he was, he could not read the riddle that any girl of sixteen would readily have undertaken to solve for him!

Meanwhile, in a distant part of the grounds called the Wilderness, Beryl and Charlie Muir were exchanging confidences with mutual satisfaction. Charlie had taken himself very severely to task after the young girl left him on the river—he had told himself he had no business to make love to her, when there was only the remotest chance of his ever being able to keep a wife, and had applied the epithet abominable to his own conduct.

Alas, for the vanity of human resolves! I fear Charlie's went to meet a worn spot in a certain pavement we wot of. At any rate, Beryl looked so charming in her new white frock that the young man decided no fellow in the world could resist her; or, if he could, he would deserve to be cut dead by all right-minded men as an unmitigated ruffian, without an atom of feeling in his composition.

Having come to this admirable conclusion, Charlie proceeded to put his theories into practice without loss of time, and accordingly decoyed Beryl into the Wilderness, with the express purpose of flinging every remnant of prudence to the four winds of Heaven. In other words, he offered her his heart, his hand, and his fortune—two hundred a year, bare!

Beryl was a little frightened at his vehemence, and for a few minutes could not summon up enough courage to give him an answer, whereupon an expression of such abject misery clouded poor Charlie's bright, boyish face, that the girl's heart was touched, and she bravely confessed she did care for him very much indeed—quite enough to marry him and his two hundred a year!

Then followed a little period of ecstatic happiness, during which these foolish young people forgot everything and everybody in the world, until Beryl raised her head from its place on Charlie's shoulder, and asked blankly, "What will mamma say?"

There was a silence. Oh! how different to the last!

"She will object," said Charlie at length, in a very matter-of-fact, take-it-for-granted sort of voice. "Of course she will object. I can't expect anything else. And then she will ask me what my means are."

"And what are they?" demanded Beryl, not so much from curiosity on her own account as a desire for data by which to measure her mother's prospective anger.

"Just two hundred a year, left me by my father when he died. He had an income of four hundred a year, and he divided it between his two children—Edward and me. Only Edward, you see, will be my uncle's heir, so he gets an extra allowance from him. I should not mind so much," Charlie continued, smugly, "if I had a profession to rely on, but, unfortunately, my uncle never saw the necessity of my doing anything, save look after the home farm in a casual sort of way; and the consequence is, here I am at the age of five-and-twenty, with nothing to do, and no prospect."

His tone was so desponding that Beryl slipped her hand in his—an action that had an instantaneous and entirely disproportionate effect!

"Is it too late, Charlie, for you to do something now?"

"No!" energetically. "I will do something; only," with another cooling of the ardour, "I daresay it may be a long while—years, perhaps—before I succeed. And during those years we shall be separated. Would you be true to me, darling, if I went away, and did not come back till my hair was getting grey, and—"

"The crows' feet were scratching my cheeks?" queried Beryl, breaking into a peal of laughter at his lugubrious tone. "Oh, Charlie, when you are pathetic you do look so ridiculous! It doesn't suit your face the least little bit in the world."

"I am glad you see the comic side of it," observed Charlie, with a dignity that marked his sense of injury at this unseemly frivolity.

"I must admit that, to me, it seems much more like tragedy." Beryl immediately became penitent, and implored forgiveness so sweetly that peace was at once restored, and the discussion of ways and means continued, until there came a message from Mrs. Mainwaring to the effect that the carriage was waiting to take her partly home.

### CHAPTER III.

The drive back was accomplished in silence—silence which made Beryl quake, for experience had taught her that her mother was most dangerous when she said the least. And, indeed, Mrs. Mainwaring's expression this evening could not have been construed by the most sanguine into amiability. The least Beryl expected on their arrival at Bechwood was a peremptory summons into the study—the room devoted by the mistress of the house to paying bills, scolding the maids, and lecturing her daughters.

The summons was given, but, strange to say, it was Hester, not Beryl, who was requested to accompany her mother, and the younger girl scurried upstairs, singing a jubilate, and wondering what sober Hester could have been doing to annoy the mother—for annoyed she assuredly was.

Her curiosity was not destined to be wholly gratified. The interview lasted nearly an hour, and then Hester came upstairs, looking white and tired, and sank rather wearily into an armchair near the window.

"What's the matter, darling?" Beryl asked, coming and kneeling at her side. "Has mother been worrying you?"

Hester's hand was laid caressingly on her sister's soft, gold curls, by way of acknowledging the unexpressed sympathy.

"Not exactly worrying me," she answered,

slowly, "but we have been discussing a subject on which we never agree."

"Old Mr. Seagrave's will?"

Hester nodded assent. The upright crease in her fair white brows deepened perceptibly. Clearly the subject was a very unpleasant one.

"I supposed the sight of Colonel Wharton revived mother's animosity," went on Beryl. "By-the-way, did you tell him who you were?"

"No, and I don't intend him to know for a few days."

"Why not?"

"Because," Hester replied, clasping her hands together with a certain feverishness, "I feel sure he has been unjustly prejudiced against me, and I want to make a friend of him before he is aware of my identity. Then I shall be able to insist on justice being done, and clear myself in his eyes as well as in other people's."

"I wonder," said Beryl, slowly, "that you care to have anything to do with him after that horrid letter he wrote."

Hester's cheeks grew scarlet, and her sensitive lips quivered rather pitifully. She did not answer quite immediately.

"That letter was, indeed, very cruel, but you must remember it was never intended for my eyes; and, besides, it was written under the sting of passion and a great disappointment. Colonel Wharton judged me harshly, but facts were strongly against me, and under the circumstances I can hardly blame him."

"I know I should blame him if I were in your place!" exclaimed Beryl, hotly. "I don't believe I could speak civilly to the man. However, you know your own business best, I suppose."

The tone in which she said this implied a doubt to the contrary, but Hester did not notice it—indeed, Hester seemed to have lost herself in a reverie, and remained sitting at the window, looking out at the daffodil western sky, where the sun was setting in a delicious haze of purple and gold, until Beryl grew impatient, and left her without telling her the secret of what had taken place in the Wilderness that afternoon.

The next morning, while breakfast was in progress, Mrs. Mainwaring, who was sitting opposite the window, suddenly put up her eyelids.

"Who is this coming up the path? Why?"—in an accent of astonishment—"it is old Mr. Muir."

"Charlie's uncle?" repeated Beryl, upsetting her coffee in her eagerness to see. "So it is. What can he want, I wonder! I thought Charlie himself would have come."

Her mother cast a penetrating glance on her as she left the room to receive her unconventionally early visitor. That glance, being interpreted, meant,—

"I shall have an explanation with you when I come back, young woman!"

"Oh, dear!" sobbed Beryl, as soon as the door closed. "I'm sure that dreadful old man has come to tell mother he won't let Charlie marry me, and then mother will say she won't let me marry Charlie, and there will be a regular row, and we shall never see each other again!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Hester, much surprised at this incoherent outburst. "What has taken place between you and Charlie?"

Then the story came out, and Hester found herself called upon to support and comfort her weeping sister—a task she had hardly succeeded in accomplishing when Mrs. Mainwaring came in. Strange to say, Mrs. Mainwaring looked neither angry nor contemptuous—in point of fact, she was radiant.

"Beryl, my child," she said, kissing the young girl affectionately—a caress received by Beryl with vivid alarm—"go in to Mr. Muir. He wants to see you. He came over for the purpose of asking my consent to your engagement with his nephew—which I have given."

"Oh, mother!" gasped Beryl, wondering whether there might not be some trap in this

beguiling amiability, and staring helplessly from Mrs. Mainwaring to Hester.

"Come, go along!" said the former, sharply, upon which Beryl made all haste out of the room, and Hester, looking surprised, said to her mother,—

"I thought you had discouraged Beryl's liking for Charlie?"

"So I had, and I should continue discouraging it if circumstances had remained the same. But they have changed. Yesterday Charlie Muir was heir to two hundred a year, to-day he is heir to two thousand. *Voilà la différence!*"

"Has someone left him a fortune, then?"

Before replying, Mrs. Mainwaring seated herself at the open window, and put back a long branch of Gloire de Dijon roses that had broken loose from its fastenings, and thrust itself intrusively into the room. There was an expression of undoubted triumph in her fine eyes.

"I will tell you how it is," she said. "As you know, Mr. Muir had announced his intention of leaving his estates to his elder twin nephew, Edward. Well, last week he went to London to see how Edward was getting on—he is supposed to be practising at the Bar, and his uncle was very anxious that he should make a mark in his profession."

"The result of the visit was not satisfactory. Mr. Muir found that Edward was leading a life of unparalleled dissipation—drinking, gambling, racing, and head over ears in debt. Perhaps the old man might have forgiven this had he not found that Edward had been borrowing money on post obits—that is to say, on the chance of his uncle's death."

"Such a crime Mr. Muir found it impossible to condone. Yesterday he returned from London, and told Charlie that henceforward he might regard himself as the heir. Charlie immediately asked his consent to his marriage with Beryl, and the old gentleman very properly said he was delighted with his nephew's choice, and promised to settle five hundred a year on the young couple directly they married."

Hester made no comment. It was characteristic of her that, while rejoicing in her sister's happiness, she should look very pitifully on the prodigal, whose misdeeds had evoked such a speedy and complete retribution.

Very soon after old Mr. Muir's departure Charlie made his appearance, brimful of delight, and the rest of the morning was spent by the lovers in the garden in a state of beatitude, which not even Mrs. Mainwaring was ruthless enough to interrupt.

After luncheon they went out for a long walk together, and Hester had the garden to herself.

Hester was lying in a hammock, trying—not very successfully—to read a volume of poems, when she heard quick, ringing footsteps on the hard gravel path.

She sprang up at once, a delicious blush spreading over cheek and brow, and advanced to meet Colonel Wharton.

Certainly there was something very fascinating in this man's personality. It was not that he was handsome exactly, or that his manners were marked by any special effort to charm.

His whole appearance was suggestive of a frank, candid generosity that could never reconcile itself with a mean deed, or even an unworthy thought.

In effect, he was the type of an English soldier, with a certain something in his face suggestive of a past not altogether happy.

"I hope I don't disturb you?" he said, after he had released the slim white hand she gave him.

"Not at all—or, rather, I am pleased to be disturbed. I had no companion except my thoughts, and they had grown wearisome."

"But surely they were pleasant ones?"

"On the contrary, they were painful, and I am very glad to dismiss them."

He was looking at her earnestly, rather wistfully, indeed.



"You are too young to know the meaning of pain, surely—at least, I hope you are?"

"Ah!" she said, with a swift outward gesture of her hands, "you too have fallen into the error that youth does not feel as age does. You are wrong! It is when all our faculties are young, and vivid, and unblunted, that they are most keenly alive to the touch of sorrow. The warm blood that leaps up so readily to meet joy is the first to chill at the approach of pain, and the chill is deeper than when the years have brought their inevitable torpor."

Strange words for a girl to speak to a man whom she had been introduced to for the first time yesterday! But, then, Hester was not conventional.

"You need not tell me that fate is not discriminating," he returned, with a half sigh. "I suppose we all suffer, young and old. It is a little difficult, sometimes, to see the necessity of it."

As Mrs. Mainwaring had gone out to make a call, it fell upon her daughter to entertain the guest, and so, a little while afterwards, the maid brought out the cups and saucers on a little wicker table, which she set under the beech tree, and Hester took her place at it, and gave Colonel Wharton his tea, which, if Colonel Wharton had been an imaginative person, he might have likened to that ambrosial fluid dispensed by Ganymede in the classical regions of Olympus.

"I think," he said, as he put his teacup down, "I met your sister as I came here. She was with Muir."

"Yes," Hester assented, and then she told him of Beryl's engagement, adding, "Of course, we are all very much pleased that the course of her love has run so smoothly."

"How shall you like losing her?"

"I shall not like it, but I suppose it is no good fighting against the inevitable." She waited a moment before she said, with a certain amount of hesitation, "You have no sisters?"

"No, nor brothers either. Luckily, I was an only child."

"Why luckily?"

"Because I have had a hard struggle with fortune, harder than I should like anyone I cared for to go through."

"You mean you have had to fight your own way through the world?"

"Yes."

"Your parents died when you were young?"

"My father died, and my mother married again. Her second husband was—not a nice man."

He spoke with constraint, that under ordinary conditions would have warned Hester the topic was an unpleasant one, which he did not care to pursue. She, however, feverishly anxious that he should speak of his past, went on with her questions.

"Naturally you resented your mother's marriage?"

"I suppose I did; nevertheless, for her sake, I bore with her husband as long as I could. At last he became unendurable, and then I ran away to some distant relation, a great aunt, who bought me a commission in the army. I never saw my mother after that!"

"You mean she died?"

"Yes."

"And your stepfather; he is dead too?"

"Yes," again.

Hester turned away her head, and was silent for a minute. Her fingers were nervously twisting themselves in and out of each other. Then she said, in a very low voice,—

"You have surely forgiven your stepfather—now?"

"I have not!" Wharton returned, with emphasis, while his eyes grew very sombre. "I know it sounds hard to speak ill of the dead, but when the evil they do survives them, complete forgiveness is almost impossible."

"And he wronged you deeply?"

"Most deeply."

"Pardon me," Hester said, very gently, "I do not wish to intrude on your sorrows, but what you have said has interested me greatly,

and——" she stopped. It was difficult to add she would like to hear more, and yet that was what her words implied.

He responded immediately. As a rule, he cared little for talking of himself, but it was very sweet to see the interest in this girl's lovely eyes, and her sympathy was too precious a thing to be repulsed.

"It is very good of you to care to hear," he answered, "and I am more than willing to give you details, if it does not bore you. This man was utterly unscrupulous—destitute of even a comprehension of honour. When my mother married him she imprudently neglected having a settlement made, and her husband at once assumed control of the property. Now, the property in question had all belonged to my father, who died a month before I was born, leaving a will by which his wife inherited everything. Of course, it was his idea that after his death it would go to his child; but, unfortunately, my mother was weak, and her second husband persuaded her to make a will leaving it all to him. So at her death he claimed every farthing, and though the estates were morally mine, I had no legal right to them."

"That was very hard!" murmured Hester, below her breath.

"It was; but even then the wrong might have been partially remedied by my stepfather making me his heir—he had no near relations of his own. However, a year before he died he married a young wife, and through her machinations every acre of my father's estate went from me."

"Through her!" Hester repeated, rather faintly. "How do you know she was to blame?"

"Because I learned it from a distant connection of my stepfather's, who lived with him as housekeeper. She told me that the old man's conscience pricked him, and he really drew up a will making me his heir, but his wife dissuaded him from letting it remain—the wretched woman, who sold her youth for the sake of his gold!"

Lower and lower drooped Hester's head over her folded hands. Her lips trembled, but she did not speak.

"I never saw this woman," Wharton went on, with his eyes on the ground, "I do not even know who she was before she was married. The only communication I kept up with my stepfather was through his former housekeeper, Miss Sandford, and our letters were very few and far between. However, she told me that the girl was young and pretty, and had succeeded in fascinating the old man, whom she had, of course, married for the sake of his money. One can hardly credit the existence of such a mercenary creature," he added, his tone deepening to intensest scorn. "It is an insult to her sex to class her in the same category. Think what a nature it must be that would immolate itself like this, body and soul, at the shrine of money!"

Hester half rose from her seat, and then, for the first time, Wharton noticed how completely the sweet red colour had left her lips and cheeks. How wild and dark her eyes had grown!

"Miss Mainwaring!" he exclaimed, rising too, and seizing her hands, "I have frightened you by my vehemence—forgive me! You look so white and faint!"

Hester exercised all her powers of self-control and resumed her seat, trying to call up a smile to her pale lips.

"I was thinking," she said, slowly and painfully, "that perhaps you misjudged this woman. After all, she may have some excuse to urge in extenuation of her marriage."

"Impossible! What excuse could there be? Besides, as I told you, her husband really did make a will leaving me the estates, but at her persuasion he destroyed it, so that his former will, by which she inherited the property, had to be acted upon. Don't run away with the impression," he added, with a slight laugh, "that I am such a mercenary person myself. As a matter of fact, my pay more than

suffices for my needs—which are few and simple. It is the injustice that cuts me—not my poverty."

Soon afterwards he took his leave, and as soon as he had gone Hester went upstairs to her room and knelt beside the bed, hiding her face in her hands.

"He was hard—very, very hard!" she murmured, aloud. "Did the poor unhappy girl deserve all he said of her? Ah, no! I hope not—I hope not!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

It is more than a week later—a glorious summer morning, with the scent of honey-suckle in the air, and a cloudless sky spreading above the smiling earth. Nature is lavish of her charms to-day. The golden grain is ripening in the fields, the hedges are flushed with delicate colour, the foliage is rich and deep and close-clustered, but as yet unfaded. It is a day on which to forget all small troubles, or sordid woes—a day when to live is to be happy.

Even Hester felt this, as she came out of a small cottage in the village, where she had been reading to a sick old woman—and, as a rule, the chords of Hester's life were all pitched in a minor key.

She looked very sweet to-day, clad in a white cotton frock, and wearing a broad-brimmed hat that shaded her face from the sun, and she blushed a divine rosy-red when she suddenly found herself confronted by Colonel Wharton.

It is true he and she had seen a good deal of each other in the interval that had elapsed since their first meeting. Once they had met on the river, once when Hester was out for a walk, and again when he had called at Beechwood.

Of course the coincidence of their meetings was singular—so singular that one might almost suspect the Colonel of a delicate adjustment of his own plans to her probable movements.

"I wish," he said, after they had shaken hands, "you would come through the wood and glance at my Hermitage. It looks very pretty just now, with all its creepers covering it."

Hester hesitated a moment in uncertainty, but finally she acquiesced, and they turned in the direction of the wood—a very pleasant exchange for the dusty high road.

Overhead the trees arched in a close roof of living green; underfoot the moss was rich and springy as the finest carpet ever woven in Eastern looms. The distant vistas looked like dim church aisles, solemn, with a brooding summer silence, that the faint twittering of the birds, or the light call of the grasshopper, only broke at long intervals.

The Hermitage was situated in the very heart of the plantation—a pretty little, one-storied house, half smothered with Virginia creeper.

The windows were small and diamond-paned, and, judging from their appearance, their capacity for admitting light must have been extremely limited.

Wharton and his companion paused outside the little railing that surrounded the tiny garden, and he went indoors, returning presently with a glass of milk and a bunch of purple grapes.

"There," he said, "you mustn't refuse my very limited hospitality. The grapes were sent me yesterday by the Lepels—a tacit reproach to me for not having called since their garden party."

"But why haven't you called?" asked Hester, accepting the fruit, and seating herself on a fallen block of wood just by the railings.

"I really can hardly tell you—because I haven't thought of it, I suppose. My thoughts have all been taken up by——" He stopped, and instead of the word he intended, substituted rather lamely, "other things."

"Housekeeping duties, for example?"

queried the girl, glancing up at him half mischievously.

"Oh, no! My man Stone looks after them. He is housekeeper, cook, valet, and bottle-washer in general."

"And you have no female domestics?"

"Certainly not!" responded the Colonel, in pious horror. "Stone manages capitally. He is an old soldier, and has been my servant ever since I entered the army."

When the grapes were finished Hester rose and declared she must hurry home, so as not to be late for luncheon.

"What would be the penalty if you were late?" asked Wharton, playfully.

"It would not be so very dreadful. Mother would tell me the servants never could finish their work if we were unpunctual with our meals, and I should meekly promise it should not occur again. I don't think anything more serious would happen."

"Then risk it!" the soldier said, boldly. "It is so delightful here in this green stillness that a potential scolding is well paid for. Life is not so full of pleasant things that one can afford to let an opportunity slip."

"Indeed, no!" Hester answered, with an unconscious sigh, and involuntarily her pace slackened, as if his logic had found a ready echo in her own heart.

Hester put away from her all thoughts of the past, all fears for the future. She held the dear, beautiful present, and it sufficed for her.

She did not even ask herself where this primrose path of dalliance was leading her, and yet she was hardly startled when Colonel Wharton broke the silence that had fallen between them by laying his hand on her shoulder and telling her he loved her. It seemed a perfectly natural sequence of what had gone before.

She did not answer quite directly, but she lifted her deep-fringed eyes to his, and there was in them some such expression as may have been in Galatea's when Pygmalion first woke the lovely marble soul to life.

"You love me!" she repeated at last, very softly. "You love me, and wish me to be your wife!"

"I love you!" he reiterated; and his voice was a little unsteady with depth of feeling.

"Ah, Hester! I love you so well that I think I should wish to lay down Heaven's good gift of life if I had not the hope of winning you for my own. But," with joyous confidence, "I do not fear—such love as mine must compel a return!"

It had compelled a return, and in this supreme moment she knew it. All this time, during which she had striven so hard to assure herself of his friendship, she had been learning love's sweet lesson, and now, in the magic mirror of his words, the truth was revealed to her.

She would have been untrue to herself if she had tried to hide her love—to practise upon him any pretty wiles or shy coquetties.

No sooner did she know her own secret than she went fearlessly forward, and laid her head on his breast, forgetful of the dark past, of the future, of everything but him!

Presently they resumed their walk homewards, and then Hester wondered whether she had better tell him that truth which it was imperative for him to know. What would he say? Would he forgive her innocent deception?

But while she was debating they had left the plantation, and were in the high road—a few minutes later at Beechwood itself. Hester decided to defer her communication until the afternoon, and have a brief spell of unalloyed happiness. When they were in the avenue she held out her hand.

"I am going to dismiss you," she said, with her sweet brief smile, "until this afternoon."

"Won't you let me come in and see your mother without delay?" he pleaded, but she shook her head very decidedly.

"No. I must tell her, first of all, myself, and prepare her for your visit. But you may come at four o'clock. Will that suit you?"

"I suppose it must," grudgingly. "But, oh, my darling! every hour spent away from you will be treble its length. I wonder how I can possibly have managed to exist without you for so long!"

The wonder is not unique in the experience of lovers. It must be acknowledged—though it is a somewhat humiliating confession—that there is a marvellous similarity in our hopes and fears, our triumphs and our sadnesses, during that potential period of our existence which we term courtship. Whether in palace or hovel its essence is much the same. It seems to me this is that "one touch of nature which makes the whole world kin!"

Hester only smiled, and then went in, he watching her until she disappeared. After that he slowly retraced his steps, feeling as if the world had suddenly grown younger, and sweeter in the divine glow of Hester's tenderness.

The girl entered the house, but then stood still, brought to a pause by her astonishment at what she saw. For in her absence a big dress-basket, a corpulent portmanteau, and two or three handboxes had made their appearance in the hall, all ready strapped and directed.

Before she had time to see whose address was on the labels Mrs. Mainwaring herself came out of the morning-room, an expression of worry and annoyance on her well-preserved features.

"Where have you been?" she asked fretfully. "I thought you were never coming."

Hester diplomatically ignored the question, and pointed to the boxes.

"Whose luggage is that?"

"A visitor's," grimly. "It belongs to no less a person than Miss Sandford, who has—very unexpectedly—honoured us with a visit."

"Miss Sandford!" repeated Hester, aghast. "Surely, mother, you did not invite her!"

"Some people don't want to be invited," Mrs. Mainwaring returned, bitterly. "I suppose she thinks she has some claim on us, and I don't wish to be uncivil to her. It seems some friends with whom she was staying were going to move into another house, and she fancied she would be in the way, so she thought of us. And, indeed," added Mrs. Mainwaring, hurriedly, "our house is large enough to accommodate guests without our being inconvenienced in the slightest degree. I don't pretend I am pleased that she has come, but we must make the best of it, and treat her in a friendly way."

Hester looked rather blank.

"I don't like Miss Sandford," she said, with great distinctness. "I never did, and I never shall. I am willing to treat her with civility, but I certainly decline to make a friend of her."

Mrs. Mainwaring stood in a wavering, indecisive manner, that was eminently uncharacteristic of her usual demeanour. She looked like a woman on unknown ground, in the vicinity of a volcano—afraid to move this way or that for fear of treading on hidden fires.

"I know, I know, Hester!" she said nervously; "but I beg, for my sake as hostess, that you will do nothing calculated to offend Miss Sandford."

The request, coming from her mother, seemed so strange that Hester could not understand it. However, there seemed no alternative but to accept the situation with the best grace she might—especially as Miss Sandford herself appeared very opportunely at the top of the stairs, thus effectually silencing any further objections.

Miss Sandford was a young lady whose claims to the adjective were a little vague. At a distance she might have passed for five-and-twenty; a nearer scrutiny suggested the possibility of adding another ten years to her age, and being nearer the mark. She was more than passably good-looking, though her beauty owed something to art.

"How do you do, dear Hester! So pleased to see you. Why, you actually don't look a

day older than when I saw you last!" she exclaimed, embracing the girl with much *empressment*.

"People don't begin to age until they have passed thirty," observed Mrs. Mainwaring, severely, *en passant*—a remark highly suggestive of her present state of mind, and decidedly inconsistent with the advice she had just given her daughter to treat the visitor with friendliness.

"And don't succeed in looking actually old until they are over forty!" returned Miss Sandford, pleasantly.

(Mrs. Mainwaring was forty-two, and prided herself on the youthfulness of her appearance!)

After this little interchange of civilities they all proceeded to the dining-room, where luncheon was waiting, and Beryl had already taken her seat. She was beguiling the tedium by playing an impromptu *valse* with a spoon on her wine glass.

"Come, come, good people—be quick and sit down. I have been waiting for you this half-hour!" she exclaimed, briskly. "I declare I am absolutely famished. I don't believe any of you others are blessed with an appetite one quarter so healthy as mine."

"We'll put that to the test," observed Miss Sandford, gaily, and taking her seat with an air of being entirely at home. "I confess to a most unpoetical hunger. I have had nothing to eat since breakfast time."

"You left London early this morning?" said Beryl, with a view of being polite.

"Yes—started from Paddington a little after ten. No doubt"—turning to Hester—"your mother has already told you that my friends are leaving their house. That was one reason why I came away. But I had a second one, and it was that which brought me here."

"Indeed!" frigidly interested.

"I heard," went on Miss Sandford, slowly, crumbling her bread into tiny fragments, but keeping her bad black eyes fixed, basilisk-wise on Hester, "that Colonel Wharton had returned from India, and had taken a shooting-box quite close to Beechwood. It is years since I saw him, and I am anxious to renew our former friendship, so I thought I could not do better than avail myself of Mrs. Mainwaring's hospitality, and come to a place where I should be pretty sure to have opportunities of meeting him."

## CHAPTER V.

If Miss Sandford's object had been to create an effect by her words she had certainly no right to complain of non-success. Each of her three listeners was more or less astounded by her declaration, though Beryl was the only one who made no effort to conceal her surprise.

That sprightly young lady immediately seized on a concrete idea, which her habit of mind enabled her to deduce from the visitor's ambiguous words.

"Wants to marry Colonel Wharton—thinks she has had enough of single blessedness. I should think so, too, if I had five-and-thirty years' experience," Beryl said to herself, with her eyes fixed on a specially brilliant patch of colour on Miss Sandford's left cheek. "Don't fancy she'll get him, though. Simple-minded as he seems, he's not the sort of man to be caught by *poudre de ris* and bloom of roses. No, Miss Sandford, you've made a mistake this time—or I have."

As for Hester, a horrid chill had suddenly fallen on her heart. What Nemesis had sent this woman here at this special moment, when so much depended on the balancing of the scale, into which she would inevitably throw the weight of a malign influence?

If she saw Colonel Wharton the result would certainly be evil. Hester must strain every nerve to prevent their meeting until after she had seen her lover and made to him the full and true confession she contemplated.

After all, it would surely be a matter of no difficulty. He would not come till four o'clock, and at that hour Miss Sandford would, in all probability, be engaged in unpacking her



numerous impedimenta. Thus Hester comforted herself, and under the consolation of her own reasoning she breathed more freely.

But her sudden pallor and nervous start had not passed unnoticed. Edith Sandford was one of those unhappy beings who live in a constant atmosphere of suspicion, and with every faculty of observation keenly on the alert.

From her youth upwards her position had been an ambiguous one, and she had not found people quite ready to take her at her own valuation—which was undoubtedly a high one.

The result was a readiness to take offence on the very smallest provocation, and a tendency to imagine slights where none were intended. She was always more or less on the defence, and occasionally aggressive as well.

Thus it frequently happened that she made enemies from pure inability to recognise a kindness of motive, which had no object of self-interest in view.

"You are acquainted with Colonel Wharton?" she said, addressing herself to Hester.

"Yes."

"How do you like him?"

A smile that was almost arch brought out two exquisite dimples in Hester's cheeks. It seemed so absolutely absurd to tell a stranger "how she liked him!"

"Colonel Wharton's is a character one could hardly fail to admire," she said. "I don't know that I am in a position to answer your question more fully."

Something in her tone grated on Edith Sandford's ear. Was it suggestive of a hidden understanding between the two?

"I shouldn't wonder if he called this afternoon," struck in Beryl, innocently adding to the complication. "I met him yesterday, and he said he would bring me over some autographs of famous soldiers he has known, either to-day or to-morrow."

The quick flush that sprang to Hester's cheek seemed to Miss Sandford singularly significant.

"I won't ask any more questions," the latter said to herself. "If I do, I am pretty sure to get crooked answers. No, I will just keep my eyes open and see what is going on for myself."

After luncheon she retired to her own room, presumably to unpack. Mrs. Mainwaring also went upstairs, complaining of a racking headache, and giving a very decided negative when Hester asked to be allowed to follow her.

"I have something important to say to you," the young girl urged.

"Whatever it may be it must wait," was the short reply, as the lady swept rustling from the room.

So Hester had nothing to do but to possess her soul in patience and wait until Wharton came, before informing her mother of her engagement.

Naturally enough she was restless and excited and quite unable to settle down to anything—a state of mind so unlike her usual tranquillity that it challenged Beryl's attention.

The younger girl watched her for some time in silence, leaning her pretty head thoughtfully on her hand. Then she said,

"Why, Hester! you remind me of myself this afternoon—you are as fidgety as a canary. What's the matter with you?"

"I feel very happy, that's all!" Hester responded. She could not tell her secret to Beryl before she had told it to her mother.

"You should never say you are happy," reprimanded her sister severely. "It's a sort of challenge to misfortune, you know!"

"Oh, Beryl, how superstitious you are!"

"Well, superstitions or not, yours is just the state of mind the Scotch call 'fey,' and, for my part, I don't like to be 'fey'!"

"Why, you little raven, what do you mean by croaking your ill omens at me?" cried Hester, laughing, and playfully pinching the young girl's cheek. "I believe you are in bad spirits yourself, and you want me to sympathise with you. Perhaps you and Charlie have had a quarrel."

"As to that, we quarrel most days, but we generally make it up before night. Yesterday Charlie got cross. He said if I tormented him by flirting with other men he should commit suicide simply. Those were his words."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him if he wanted to commit suicide I should certainly advise him to do it simply, and then he laughed, and we were all right again."

The clock struck three. In less than an hour Alec would be here. Hester determined to go in the garden and wait for him. By this she would prevent all possibility of Miss Sandford seeing him first.

She walked slowly up and down the lawn, by the sunny south wall that bounded it—a wall lovely with grey and orange lichens, with toadflax sending its shining leaves and tiny violet flowers out of all the crevices, and bushes of gloire de Dijon roses climbing up to its mossy top.

Miss Sandford's window commanded not only a view of this wall, but also of the high road beyond—a long, level stretch of nearly half a mile, white and glaring in the brilliant afternoon sunshine.

In the dazzling perspective of this road Miss Sandford saw a figure advancing, and, being curious, she produced a pair of field-glasses, by whose aid she contrived to satisfy herself as to the identity of the figure.

Then she looked in the glass, scientifically rumpled her fringe, and took up a bright red parasol, which was one of her most effective weapons.

After that she descended the stairs. As she passed Mrs. Mainwaring's door a voice called "Hester!" and Miss Sandford stopped and smiled.

"Dear Mrs. Mainwaring, it is I—not Hester. She is in the garden. I will tell her to come to you!"

Religiously, Miss Sandford kept her word, adding, "I am afraid your mother is ill—her voice sounded like that of a woman in pain."

Poor Hester! It was very hard to have to leave her post, and yet she could not disobey her mother's summons.

She looked at her watch. It was only just half-past three. Alec would not be here for a good twenty minutes yet; and perhaps, in the interval, she might be able to acquaint Mrs. Mainwaring with what had passed in the morning—that is to say, if her mother proved well enough to hear it.

Miss Sandford looked after her with a well-satisfied smile, then walked slowly down the avenue, and leaned on the gate, lowering her parasol so that it hid her face.

It was thus Alec Wharton saw her; but he did not know at first that it was not Hester, for Beryl possessed a red parasol, and it was quite possible her sister had borrowed it.

His heart began to beat riotously. He knew he was too early, and he had not intended entering the grounds until the time appointed, but the temptation of walking outside them had proved irresistible. And here was his dainty lady-love, to the full as impatient as himself, and waiting for him!

The parasol was suddenly lowered. He stepped back a pace in astonishment, that bore an uncomplimentary resemblance to deep disappointment. All the tender longings, the warm tenderness, died out of his face.

"Don't you know me, Alec?" Miss Sandford said at last, after a lengthened pause. "Have I changed so much in these ten years that you cannot even recognise me?"

"It is not that I don't recognise you," he said, recovering himself, and coming forward to shake hands, "but I am immensely astonished to see you here."

"And not pleasantly astonished, it would seem," she went on, with a playfulness which had a very bitter edge.

"That is hardly a fair thing to say!" the Colonel responded, with a straightforward gravity that was a rebuke.

She slowly released his hand, which, until this moment, she had held in hers. Across the gulf of years her thoughts had flown to the time when she had gone to old Mrs. Seagrave's house, half as maid, half companion to his wife. Then, Alec Wharton had been a handsome, bright-eyed boy of about her own age, and a semi-flirtation had sprung up between them, born of idleness on his part, and something more designing on hers.

She, indeed, had been as deeply in love with him as her selfish nature would permit, and once, in a moment of weakness, she had told him so!

Even now the hot blood came to her cheek as she recalled that terrible renunciation of her maiden dignity, and the bitter humiliation of his reply.

He had been very gentle with her, but he had attempted no palliation of the truth. She was his friend—nothing more!

With this she declared herself satisfied, and then she did her best to erase what had gone before from his mind.

After his departure from home she had written to him occasionally; but all the while, deep, brooding resentment smouldered in her heart. She only bided her time to revenge the slight he put upon her.

And yet of late, strangely and inconsistently enough, she had cherished vague hopes that when he came back from India the force of old associations would bring him to her.

Then, if she could persuade him that it was faithfulness to her first love that had kept her single, it was possible she might make it a point of honour with him to marry her.

This hope—there was something pitiful in it, after all!—had driven her to seek him directly he sent her word that he was in England, and it died, once and for ever, as she dropped his hand at the gate at Beachwood.

"You are not married?" she exclaimed, speaking on the impulse of a strong suspicion.

He smiled, and shook his head.

"I am not married yet, but I hope to be very soon!"

She laughed a little hysterically, and turned aside to snap off a tell gloriole, whose spike of scarlet blossoms had got broken. There was a species of self-pity at her heart. She knew that in the ruins of the airy castle her fancy had built, the last remnant of her youth lay buried.

"May I take the privilege of an old friend and ask who the lady is?" she said, presently.

"Certainly. She is Miss Mainwaring!"

"Beryl Mainwaring?"

"Not Beryl—Hester! Why do you stare so? Is there anything extraordinary in what I have said?"

Haste, Hester, haste! A vindictive woman holds you in her power, and she will exact your debt of youth and beauty to her to the uttermost farthing! Congreve was right when he said,—

"Hell has no fury like a woman scorned!"

But Hester, having soothed her mother, who is suffering from the torture of a nervous headache, has taken her station at an upper landing window which commands the same view as Miss Sandford's bedroom. She can see Alec's approach from here, she thinks. But, alas! the avenue gate is invisible to her!

"There is something very extraordinary, indeed, in what you have said," Miss Sandford remarked, in reply to his query, and she spoke with a curious deliberation. "I confess I do not quite understand the position. You are really and truly engaged to be married to Mrs. Mainwaring's elder daughter, Hester, whom you know under the name of Hester Mainwaring?" This very insistently.

Colonel Wharton threw his head back with some impatience. He was a man who hated all small feminine mysteries, and it seemed to him Miss Sandford was mystifying him—or trying to—with an irritating persistence. His dark brows knitted themselves together in a highly suggestive manner, which warned his com-

panion she had well-nigh exhausted his forbearance.

"I repeat it," he said, sternly. "Miss Hester Mainwaring has promised to become my wife!" This time Edith Sandford laughed—a harsh, joyless, mocking laugh, with no chord of music in it. Then she turned upon him swiftly, anger and contempt flashing in her eyes.

"You fool!" she breathed, in a voice that was a sibilant whisper. "This woman has duped you as she duped your stepfather before you. Hester Mainwaring, forsooth! She is Hester Seagrave—James Seagrave's widow!—the woman who has robbed you of your birth-right!"

Many times had Wharton been in action, and never once had he flinched as the bullets fell, thick as hail, about him, and sword and bayonet flashed deadly bright in the tropic sunlight.

But he staggered back now, and put up his hand with a gesture that seemed to implore mercy.

"No!" he muttered, thickly. "It is impossible—it cannot be!"

"But it is!" Edith Sandford said, standing before him dark and pitiless, the end of her red parasol dug into the gravel, and her two hands resting on the handle. "And she has revenged herself for the slighting way you spoke of her in the letter you wrote to me after her husband's death. Do you remember you called her a mercenary adventuress?"

"I remember."

"She said it was an insult, and she resented it as such. The recollection of it rankled, and she openly declared it should some time be atoned for. But," and again Miss Sandford laughed unpleasantly, "I did not think the atonement would be so swift and so complete as this."

The ring in that mocking laugh almost maddened Alec. What could he think—what should he believe?

"Ah!" he exclaimed, as the faint rustle of a woman's garments fell on his ear, "here is Hester herself. Now I shall know the truth."

He turned to her with a great love shining in his eyes—an infinite trust that no words but her own should shake. Alas! Hester stood as if petrified, her very lips white, and a horrible dread stamping itself in plainest characters on her face. Instinctively Wharton fell back a pace.

In a moment Hester partly recovered herself, and her quick woman's wit enabled her to comprehend the situation. She went swiftly up to the soldier, and laid one hand on his arm.

"Alec!" she cried, and her voice rang out with a certain shrillness of apprehension, "what has this woman been telling you?"

"The truth, Mrs. Seagrave," steadily answered Miss Sandford, returning her gaze without flinching. "Deny it if you can!"

Hester's head drooped in a sudden self-abasement. Deny it! No, she could not deny it, but the shame of it was not her own. Almost immediately she turned to Alec, her lips trembling with the eagerness to justify herself.

"Wait before you judge me!" she cried, piteously. "Don't condemn me unheard! If I have done wrong, I have at least expiated my fault."

For a moment he wavered. His love for her was so great that it almost seemed to him, as he gazed on her fair, pallid beauty, nothing she had done, or could do, would matter much, so only that he might call her his own!

The thought was an unworthy one, and it died in the same moment that gave it birth. But Edith Sandford's sharp eyes intercepted the glance, and she ground her teeth in a fierce access of impotent jealousy. Was this girl—this fair-haired Hester—to thwart her always in her dearest projects—her best-natured plans?

Two years ago, when she thought her own influence was paramount with old James Seagrave, and that, in order to spite his stepson, he would make her his heiress, Hester Main-

waring crossed her path, and took her place as mistress of Wharton Chase.

After the old man's death she inherited all his money, and now she reigned supreme in the heart of the one man Miss Sandford had loved.

The contrast between the two lives was sharp enough, and the woman, who was young, rich, and lovely, would become the honoured wife of Alec Wharton, while her rival—who possessed none of these advantages—saw her own future stretch before her in a weary blank of years, unloved, unhonoured, untended.

Miss Sandford's heart rose in bitter revolt. This thing should not be. She would play her last—and winning—card!

"Alec," she said, without deigning to notice Hester, "you used to be a man of honour, and I have heard you say that your wife must be like Caesar's—above reproach. If your opinions are the same now, there exists an imperative reason why you should not marry Mrs. Seagrave. There is a secret in her past which should prevent her from becoming the wife of any honest man. Ask her to explain the disappearance of Mr. Seagrave's last will!"

## CHAPTER VI.

There was an intentional dramatic effect in the way Edith Sandford said these last words, and it jarred on Colonel Wharton, who had an intense hatred of anything theatrical in real life.

He withdrew himself farther away and looked slowly from one woman to the other—the elder, darkly flushed, and with the eager light of a coming victory in her eyes; the younger, perfectly white and impassive, except for an occasional spasmodic twitching of the muscles of the mouth.

"Mrs. Seagrave does not seem inclined to accept the challenge," went on the pitiless voice. "I will explain. Ten days before his death Mr. Seagrave made a will by which you inherited all his estates, and his wife simply took an annuity. On the night preceding his death that will disappeared!"

Still no word from Hester. Miss Sandford continued,—

"I am in a position to prove that Mr. Seagrave himself did not destroy it, for I saw it in an old bureau in his room the night before he died, when he was in a state of coma, from which he never afterwards recovered."

"The nurse, who sat up with him the earlier part of the night, will tell you her place was taken about two o'clock by Mrs. Seagrave, and at half-past two I went to the sick room to see how the patient was. To my surprise I found the door locked. I listened, and heard the faint rustle of paper, and then my suspicions were aroused, and I determined to see what was happening."

"As you know, there is a small window in the wall, just above the door—you see them in many old-fashioned houses—and, by placing a stool on the top of one of the landing chairs, I was able to look in and command a view of the inside of the room."

"A woman was standing in front of the bureau, whose face I could not see, but she wore a dressing gown trimmed with fur, which I immediately recognised as belonging to Mrs. Seagrave."

"After a minute or two she threw into the fire a blue paper, which I felt sure must be the will—and after events proved me to be right." Miss Sandford turned contemptuously to Hester. "I have spoken the truth, and you will not dare deny it!"

While she was speaking Hester's face had become the embodiment of white despair. On being thus appealed to she made an effort to speak, and then checked herself hastily.

A spell of horror seemed to have fallen upon her, from which she could not free herself. She shuddered convulsively, then covered her face with her hands.

As he watched her Alec's face also changed—grew grey and shadowed with great fear.

There was something terribly suggestive in Hester's attitude.

"If this be true," he broke in, his voice rough and stern, "how is it that you have kept silence so long?"

"Because I did not wish to act on my own responsibility; and if I had spoken then there would have been a public scandal. I knew you would be in England before long, so I determined to wait till you came, and then leave you to act as you thought fit. That my motives are disinterested you will acknowledge when I tell you that by the first will your uncle made I was left two thousand pounds, while the second only gave me half that amount. Now, ask Mrs. Seagrave to explain what I saw in her husband's death chamber on that eventful night!"

The concentrated triumph of supreme vengeance thrilled in Miss Sandford's vindictive tones—the light of a hatred that had grown more venomous with each day, burnt its way through her eyes.

She looked at that moment the very personification of a relentless fury—pitiless as fate, implacable as doom itself!

But Alec did not waste so much as a glance upon her. All he saw was the woman he loved shrinking back like a wounded animal from the horror of the accusation, but making no sign of denial!

It was true, then. She, whom he had thought the essence of all that was sweet, noble, and maidenly had sold her youth for the sake of an old man's money—had bartered her honour for the same sordid reason.

"After the first, the second crime was only a sequence," he said to himself, bitterly, and then he turned away, his face grown suddenly old, as he fumbled blindly with the fastening of the gate.

She made no effort to stay him. Her hands fell helplessly to her side, and her eyes followed his every movement with a strained attention that yet had in it something of apathy.

As the gate fell back behind him its metallic clang seemed to rouse her, and she threw out both hands with a tragic gesture of despair.

But he did not look back. If he had he would have seen her make a movement forwards, as if to recall him, and then pause as Edith Sandford stepped before her in the path.

For a few seconds the two women faced each other without speaking—Hester still trembling, Miss Sandford pitilessly triumphant.

Then Hester's pride came back to her aid. Humiliated as she had been she would not abase herself before her rival.

Little by little a faint colour returned to her cheeks, and she drew herself more upright, sternly choking back the icy pain that was at her heart.

"Have I surprised you by my knowledge of that night's events?" Edith asked, when the last echo of Alec's footsteps had died away.

"Were you in ignorance of what I saw?" Hester lowered her head without speaking, but now a deep red had dyed even her throat and brow. She looked like a woman in burning agonies of shame.

"It fell rather hardly on you, then?" continued Miss Sandford, with a little lifting of her shoulders. "Well, other people have suffered—there is no reason why you should go scot-free."

Perhaps in those last words there was the faintest possible accent of remorse. Edith Sandford was selfish to the core, but when she was not swayed by the passions of hatred and jealousy she was not absolutely pitiless, and there was an expression on the girl's face that touched even her.

"One minute," Hester said, catching her dress as she turned away. Her voice was harsh and strained, and the words came with difficulty through her dry lips. "Does anyone—does any other person know what you have said this afternoon?"

Miss Sandford looked at her significantly.



"Yes—one other. But you need be under no apprehension. I had a purpose in what I said, and it is achieved. So long as you do not marry Alec Wharton, so long you may trust my discretion. At the same time, it may be well for you to bear in mind that it is in my power to bring irretrievable disgrace on you and your family."

"I don't know how it is," Beryl said, one morning when she was alone with her sister, "but everybody in this house seems to be suffering from an acute attack of the blues—you, mother, and our dear pussy-cat Sandford. I shall have them next."

"Oh, no!" Hester returned, with a brave attempt at a smile. "You have Charlie to fall back on."

"That is true. Charlie is certainly a host in himself, only there are certain portions of the day when I am not with him."

"Infinitesimal portions, Beryl!"

"Well," said Beryl, rather shamefacedly, "it's rather dull for him at home. Old gentlemen are all very well in their way, only they are better out of the way! and Mr. Muir is decidedly grumpy with Charlie just now."

"How is that?"

"Why, it is all through that horrid brother of Charlie's—Edward. As you know, he is head over ears in debt, and his uncle absolutely refuses to help him. Edward keeps on writing for money, and declaring he is in most fearful straits, but he won't go to the colonies, as Mr. Muir wishes him to. The beginning of this week he sent a most imploring letter to Charlie, begging for the loan of a hundred pounds, and Charlie, who," Beryl added with complacent satisfaction, "is stupidly tender-hearted, at once went to the old gentleman and asked for that amount as a loan to himself."

"Mr. Muir wanted to know what he required it for, but Charlie refused to tell him—as Edward had specially requested him to keep it secret—and then there was a sort of a squabble, and that abominable old gentleman accused Charlie—my Charlie!—of having disreputable debts and being little better than his brother."

"The upshot of it was, he flatly declined lending him a penny-piece, so Charlie has decided to sell his horse, and he went to W— this morning to arrange about it. Consequently I don't expect him here till late this evening."

Her expectations were verified. Charlie did not arrive at Beechwood until nine o'clock. He had been detained, and he had not sold his horse, neither of which circumstances tended to put him in a cheerful humour.

Indeed, Beryl told him, with uncompromising candour, that he was such an extremely depressing companion that she absolutely refused to remain *tête-à-tête* with him.

Consequently she took him into the drawing-room, where Hester and her mother were reading by the light of a rose-shaded lamp. Mrs. Mainwaring put down her book as her future son-in-law entered.

"Well, Charlie, have you brought us any news from W—?"

"No. W— is such a horrid, slow, sleepy old place, that it never supplies one with anything more exhilarating than old maids' scandal. I was glad to get away."

"Was your uncle there with you?"

"No. He had gone over to a farm belonging to him at Westbury, to collect the rent; and when he goes there he is generally late in coming home, for the tenant is an old chum of his, and they always play cribbage together when they meet."

"An odd time of year to collect rent, isn't it?"

"Perhaps it is," answered Charlie, beginning to play with his *fiancée's* ball of pink wool, and succeeding in an infinitesimally short time in reducing her work to a state of chaos. "It is an old-established custom of my uncle's to go over to the farm on his birthday, which is to-day. He has done it so long as I can remember."

"By the way," added Charlie, turning to Mrs. Mainwaring, as Beryl indignantly snatched her knitting from his hand, "on my way here I met old Doctor Wall, and he told me he had just come from Colonel Wharton's. Poor Wharton is very ill—got rheumatic fever through the damp walls of that hole of a place he lives in. It seems very doubtful whether he'll get over it."

A smothered cry broke from poor Hester's lips, but in the hum of conversation it passed unnoticed, and a few seconds later she quietly left the room, and went out into the garden. She felt faint, suffocated, and fresh air was a necessity to her.

Alec ill—dying, perhaps, and she not near to tell him he had misjudged her! Oh, it was too cruel to think of him lying on his sick-bed with no tender hands to minister to him, no loving voice to whisper comfort in his ear!

And he might go down to his grave believing her guilty!

She lifted her face to the stars, looking down so calmly, so passionately from the purple depths of sky. They breathed such a still serenity that it seemed as if Nature, with her own deep tranquillity, mocked human passion and human pain.

The night winds—soft as baby fingers—slipped caressingly through the glossy laurel foliage, and shook down a few golden petals from the roses trained against the house; the tall white lilies—now in the last stage of their bloom—sent out a cloud of perfumed incense, and from below, where the lapping of the river against the bank came at regular intervals, there sounded the plaintive cry of the corn-crake.

Hester's heart was full of hot, rebellious pain. Why had Fate marked her out for such undeserved suffering?

A minute later, and an idea struck her. She would go and see Alec—now, at once—and if he were indeed so ill that recovery was impossible, she would tell him the truth. Under such circumstances, she would be justified in doing so.

She was about going indoors to fetch a cloak when considerations of prudence stopped her.

If she were to leave the house now her absence would be discovered. Besides, in order to get to the Hermitage, she would have to pass through the village, and her appearance, unattended, would be sure to excite remark, which above all things she wished to avoid.

Suddenly she bethought herself of Charlie Muir. He was staunch and loyal, and she felt she could trust him. Yes, she was asking him to accompany her as far as the plantation, and his honour was sufficient guarantee that he would never betray her confidence.

It was not long before Charlie came out, greatly disgusted because Beryl punished him for tangleing her work by not coming to the gate to wish him good-night.

His surprise was considerable when he suddenly found himself confronted by Hester, who put her finger to her lip to enjoin silence.

"Charlie," she said, when they were out of earshot of the house, "I want you to do me a favour."

"Tell me what it is," Charlie rejoined, promptly. "I would do anything in the world for you."

"Then will you accompany me as far as Colonel Wharton's lodge and back, and will you give me your word of honour to keep the matter a profound secret, even from Beryl when she is your wife?"

Charlie's astonishment was profound; but he instantly gave the required promise.

"Thank you!" Hester said, simply. "I shall return to the drawing-room, wish the others good night, then I will go upstairs and lock my door, and slip out unseen. No one will know I have left the house. Meanwhile, stand behind the laurel bushes till I come."

She was not long before she reappeared,

wearing a long cloak, whose broad hood was drawn well over her face.

As they left the grounds the hall clock struck the hour of twelve, and by this time the night was less clear than it had been.

She took Charlie's arm, and they walked at a good pace down the high road until they came to the village, which was quite deserted.

She clung a little tighter to his arm when they entered the plantation, but by the time the Hermitage was reached she had recovered her courage.

"Stay outside the railings," she whispered, "while I go to the house."

He acquiesced, and she made her way to the porch. As she stood, momentarily hesitating, the murmur of voices suggested that some window must be open, and she determined to take advantage of this circumstance, and see who was with the sick man.

It was the window on the left side of the door, and she crept cautiously round in the shadow, and was able to see the interior of the room with perfect distinctness.

A fire was burning in the grate, and a woman, in the garb of a nurse, was near it, stirring something in a saucepan, and conversing at the same time with a man whom Hester guessed to be Stone, Alec's servant.

The apartment had two doors—one leading to the passage, and the other to the officer's bedchamber. Both were closed.

Hester could not hear all that was said, for the conversation was carried on in a low tone, but she was able to gather from such sentences as reached her that the crisis of the fever had come, and that even now the doctor was with his patient watching him through it.

"Poor soul!" sighed the nurse, "I'm afraid it's all over with him. I've never yet seen a man as bad and weak as he is recover."

Hester pressed both hands firmly on her mouth, and, crouching down under the window-sill, she waited there, her very soul hungering for the appearance of the doctor, and the message of fate he would bring.

At last the door of communication opened, and the watcher's heart stood still, as with slow and cautious footsteps the doctor came from the sick chamber.

A mist swam before Hester's eyes, but through it she saw him lift his hand to enjoin silence, and her strained ear caught his words, though they were spoken in a whisper.

"Colonel Wharton is sleeping. The crisis is over, and he will recover!"

#### CHAPTER VII.

After seeing Hester safely indoors Charlie Muir returned to his own home, and let himself in with his latchkey. He was just on his way upstairs when he was startled by the appearance of his uncle at the end of the passage.

"Charles! will you spare me a few minutes, if you please, before you go to bed?"

Somewhat surprised, the young man followed Mr. Muir into the study, where the latter took up his favourite position in front of the fireless grate, and looked at his nephew with curious and searching intentness.

"You are late to-night!" he observed.

"Yes," Charlie returned, uncomfortably. "I suppose I am."

"Where have you been this evening?"

"At Beechwood."

"Nowhere else?"

Charlie made no answer. He had a distinct aversion to telling lies, even white ones, but he must, at all hazards, keep faith with Hester.

"Now, Charlie," Mr. Muir said, impressively, "I want to know what time you left Beechwood, and you may as well confess the truth, for I shall make inquiries of Mrs. Mainwaring in the morning, so you see a lie won't help you."

"I had no intention of telling one," with proud disdain, "neither have I any objection to letting you know that I left the house somewhere about twelve o'clock."

"And what have you been doing since?" "Oh, pottering about—smoking and thinking."

"Indeed!" satirically. "It is a pity you did not select a finer night for your meditation. It has been drizzling with rain for the last hour and a half. May I ask the direction your 'potterings' took?"

"I have been loitering between here and Beechwood," he replied, evasively. "That is rather vague. Give me a more definite answer."

"I cannot."

"Cannot—or will not?"

"Which you like," Charlie returned, with a fine assumption of indifference. "The fact remains the same."

"Yes!" exclaimed the old man, sternly, "the fact remains that you have a motive for concealing your movements, and one you are ashamed to confess. Oh, Charlie, Charlie!" his voice changed from anger to grief, "I can hardly believe it possible you would be guilty of such a crime—you, whom I have trusted so implicitly!"

"I don't understand you, uncle," faltered the young man, but he grew very red, for he now felt certain he must have been seen with Hester.

The old man shook his head sadly.

"Yes, yes, you understand me well enough. You knew that when I came home from the farm to-night I should be late, I should ride alone, and I should have in my pocket-book a hundred and fifty pounds. You knew this?"

"Yes, yes!" more than ever mystified.

"You knew that I should take the short cut through Water Lane, that I am an old man and not so strong as I used to be, and, therefore, that it would be easy enough to stop me and take my leather bag from me—the bag that no one, save members of my own household, could be aware I carried, strapped round my waist, underneath my coat. And this you knew, and you took advantage of it to waylay and rob me at one o'clock this morning—you, whom I have regarded as my own son!"

"Uncle!" exclaimed Charlie, and he was actually too stupefied at the accusation to say more. He remained staring at his uncle in speechless surprise, which the old man very naturally mistook for conscious guilt.

"I knew you were in debt, from your wanting to borrow that hundred pounds," added Mr. Muir, "and I had resolved to lend it to you to-morrow morning. But you were too impatient to wait."

"Uncle, you wrong me. I swear you do!" exclaimed Charlie, finding his voice. "The mere thought of such a crime is abominable to me. I declare to you most positively I have not been near Water Lane this week or more."

"How is it, then, you won't tell me where you have been—where you were at that precise hour, one o'clock?"

"Because I cannot. A promise withholds me."

"Do you expect me to believe this?" asked Mr. Muir, scornfully. "I am a fool even for questioning you. Why, although you were masked, there was something about your air and figure that I felt sure I recognised even in the darkness. There, there! go away. The mere sight of you is painful to me now. I shall give no publicity to what has occurred for the sake of my own good name, but the same roof cannot shelter us two any longer. You had better join your charming brother without delay—you make a fine pair!"

Like a man in a dream Charlie went mechanically upstairs, where he set down on the bed, and burying his face in his hands, tried to reason out his strange mischance.

Think as he might, he could find no clue to the mysterious stranger who had so unceremoniously attacked his uncle. He sighed heavily as he contemplated the trouble in store for himself, and then, dressed as he was, threw himself on the bed, and in spite of all slept firmly until nine o'clock in the morning.

When the footman brought his shaving water he also brought with it a note, which proved to be from Mr. Muir. It was short, and to the point.

"As I do not wish to have a repetition of the painful scene of last night," it said, "I have left home for this day, so that you may take your departure without my seeing you. Understand once and for all I have done with you! My money will go to a hospital. Neither you nor your brother shall benefit one farthing by it."

"JOHN MUIR."

"Let him do what he likes with his accursed money!" cried Charlie, in a furious ebullition of wrath, under the influence of which he gave orders to the man to pack his boxes and have them sent to the station, and then hurried off to Beechwood, with rather a quaking heart, it must be confessed, for Mrs. Mainwaring was not a comfortable person to face under present circumstances.

It happened that he found her alone, the two girls having gone on the river; and so, with as cheerful a mien as he could assume, he told her that he had had a quarrel with his uncle, which had effectually estranged them, consequently in future he had only himself to depend upon.

Mrs. Mainwaring was aghast.

"A quarrel—with your best friend! My dear Charlie, how could you be so imprudent?" with uplifted hands. "But surely the quarrel is not final, it can be patched up?"

"It is final, and it cannot be patched up," he declared, annoyed by her manner. "It is not worth while wasting words about it."

"You mean you will not ask your uncle's forgiveness?"

"I mean that it is he who should ask my forgiveness, not I his," retorted the young man, hotly.

Mrs. Mainwaring's lips compressed themselves in one firm and highly suggestive line.

"You will at least tell me what the quarrel was about?"

"That I must decline doing. It is a matter concerning one other person besides my uncle, and so I am not at liberty to speak."

"In that case," said the lady, with cold deliberation, "you can hardly expect me to sanction the continuance of your engagement to my daughter. Beryl is not one of those fortunate young women who have a 'dot,' and a wealthy marriage is a necessity for her. As a man of honour you will, no doubt, see that it is your duty to release her."

Not unnaturally, Charlie was at that moment less inclined to regard his relations with Beryl from the standpoint of a "man of honour" than from that of a lover, and it was for this reason, perhaps, that he looked blankly miserable at Mrs. Mainwaring's suggestion. To lose fortune and lady-love at one fell blow was indeed hard lines.

Just then an unlooked-for interruption came. Beryl herself entered through the French window, and quietly put her arm through that of her lover.

She had overheard Mrs. Mainwaring's last speech, and it had given her the key to the situation. Now she stood facing her mother, her eyes flashing, her scarlet lips curling, her small form drawn up to all its insignificant height.

"Mamma," she said, and, absurd as it seemed, Mrs. Mainwaring actually fancied there was scorn in her ringing tones, "you appear to be under the impression that hearts are like billiard balls, that you, who hold the cue, can push about in any direction you please! Now, as a rule, I am quite willing to admit your superior wisdom, but in this solitary instance I claim to know best. Hearts are not playthings, but real, living fleshy things that do not wait to be bidden before they love and hate, joy or sorrow—things that have the right to claim consideration—even from a mother!"

"From what I overheard, as I came in, it seems that Charlie's uncle has somehow disinherited him. Well, I am sorry for that, but I don't find it makes any difference to Charlie himself, and I'm sure it doesn't make any difference to me! What I love is Charlie, not

his prospects or his uncle's wealth, but just himself! And," continued this undiplomatic daughter, "whether he's rich, or whether he's poor, I shall still hold myself engaged to him, and wait patiently—years, and years, and years, if need be—until he is ready to claim me!"

"In spite of me, Beryl?" exclaimed Mrs. Mainwaring, faintly.

"In spite of you, mother, or anybody else in the world!"

#### CHAPTER VIII.

With a daughter who expressed herself in this decided fashion there was nothing to be done save accept the inevitable with the best grace one could; and so Mrs. Mainwaring was forced to admit herself conquered, and allow the engagement to continue.

Charlie had rapidly matured his plans, which were to go to London, and see an old friend of his father's, who was in business in the City, and who might be able to give him a berth.

Even to Beryl he did not give details of his quarrel with his uncle; and she, like a good little woman, was content—or professed to be—with the assurance that, as the secret was not his own, honour forbade his divulging it. And so they said good-bye, very tenderly, very tearfully, but still with that eager trust in the future which is only given to youth.

After his departure the days passed on in a dull level of monotony. By some means or other Hester contrived to get daily bulletins of Wharton's health, and each one told of a gradual improvement, till at length the news came, in the latter part of August, that he was quite well, and had gone to London to make arrangements for returning to India some time before Christmas.

Soon after this, Miss Sandford left, sadly tired of country dullness.

"Thank goodness she is gone!" exclaimed Beryl, executing a *pas seul* as she watched the cab drive off. "I don't want to be uncharitable, but I am distinctly of opinion that if ever the attributes of a serpent dwelt in the soul of a woman, that woman is Edith Sandford!" and neither her mother nor sister contradicted her!

To the bad weather now prevailing, Mrs. Mainwaring attributed the fact that Hester had become very pale and thin, and had lost her appetite; but when the autumn days were mellow with sunlight, there was no corresponding change in Hester's appearance, and then her mother began to suspect there must be some other cause for her white cheeks and hollow eyes.

"What is the matter with you, Hester?" she asked, one day, when they were alone together; "you go about the place like some sad spirit. You eat nothing, you care for nothing. Life seems to have lost its savour for you!"

"I suppose the autumn tries me," Hester answered, with quivering hesitation.

"But other autumns have not had an effect like this upon you!"

She made no reply. In spite of her strivings, the loss of Alec, and the secret she held, weighed upon her like an actual physical burden.

"I shall take you away to the sea," Mrs. Mainwaring said, decisively. "A month at Brighton will soon put you to rights."

"Indeed, mother, I shall be just as well at home."

"Nonsense! I know what is good for you a great deal better than you do. Child as you are!" Mrs. Mainwaring said, with a forced smile, "remember, you are still under age, and therefore an infant in my eyes, and in those of the law."

The observation seemed to awaken a new train of thought in Hester's mind—a flash of eagerness crossed her face.

"But I shall soon be twenty-one!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "If I live till January I shall be my own mistress, and able to do what I like with my husband's money!"



Her mother frowned slightly.

"Still harping on the old string! I had hoped time would have taught you wisdom."

"Time has more than ever convinced me of the necessity for justice," Hester returned, with some sternness; "and the very day I am twenty-one I shall make a deed of gift of all I inherited from Mr. Seagrave to Colonel Wharton!"

Something in her tone warned her mother that silence was the best reply she could give to this assertion; and the elder woman went to the window, sighing heavily, and wondering whether it was ever any good to strive with fate! What is to be will be, and human intervention is, after all, but fruitless endeavour.

Just then a visitor was announced, and then entered a short, fussy old gentleman, whose appearance was a surprise both to mother and daughter—none other than Mr. Muir.

He seemed a little nervous and uncertain of his welcome, and not without good cause, for Mrs. Mainwaring was frigidity itself as she greeted him.

"I'm come to justify myself, Mrs. Mainwaring," he said, coming to the point without any sort of preamble. "When I met you at Mrs. Lepell's the other day I noticed a great falling off in your former friendliness, and we have been neighbours for so many years that it seems a little hard you should misjudge me. Besides, I hear your younger daughter is still engaged to my scapegrace of a nephew; and I think, considering our relative positions, I owe it to you to explain the basis of our quarrel."

Mrs. Mainwaring bowed her head without speaking, and Hester rose with the intention of quitting the room. Her mother, however, made a sign for her to stay, and so she resumed her seat.

Fidgeting restlessly about, like one not quite sure of himself, Mr. Muir gave a short account of being waylaid on his return from the farm, and his reason for suspecting that his nephew was the culprit.

"And you really believed that Charlie was capable of such treachery?" exclaimed Mrs. Mainwaring, whose robust common sense refused to accept this alternative. "Without a moment's hesitation I pronounce you to be wrong."

"But my dear lady, remember his confusion when I asked him where he had been, and confess it looks like guilt! Besides, why should he so resolutely refuse to tell me where he had been between twelve o'clock that night and two o'clock in the morning?"

Mrs. Mainwaring shook her head, but remained unconvinced.

All at once Hester uttered a little cry, which had the effect of directing the attention of the other two towards her. She was paler than ever, but her eyes were lucent with a strange eagerness. She understood Charlie's reticence now, and she knew that, rather than betray her, he had chosen to forfeit his inheritance!

Without a moment's hesitation she came over to the old gentleman, and took his horny old hand in her soft young one—standing before him, pale and resolute, and fair as some mediæval saint of old days.

"Mr. Muir," she said, earnestly, "I can give you the answer that Charlie refused. He was with me during those two hours, so it is impossible that he can have been your assailant!"

"With you?" in strongly-marked accents of surprise.

"Yes," Hester said, unflinchingly, though a deep crimson spot had leapt to her cheek. "I wanted to see a—sick man," her voice faltered a little, and her thick lashes veiled her eyes for a moment, but she went bravely on, "and I had a motive for concealing my visit from my family. I did not dare go alone, and so I watched for Charlie outside until he had wished the others 'good-bye,' and came into the garden. Then I asked him to accompany me, and, more than that, to keep secret the fact of having done so. He

promised—and how nobly he has kept his promise you have seen!"

Mr. Muir looked at her for a few moments with the careful scrutiny of a man who fears to be deceived; but no one who saw those sweet, steadfast eyes, full of truth and purity, could doubt her veracity. In spite of himself he was convinced.

"If that is the case," he muttered, "I suppose I must have been mistaken—and yet, the figure was like his!"

"The evidence of your eyesight, on a dark night, is a very slender proof," put in Mrs. Mainwaring. "Besides, there are a good many men whose figures may be more or less like Charlie's—his brother Edward's, for example. I have often mistaken the one for the other until I have seen their faces."

The old gentleman jumped up in a violent hurry, and came over to his hostess, his face suddenly beaming.

"My dear madam, you have hit the right nail on the head this time! I never thought of Edward—idiot that I was! Of course, it was Edward. He knew as well as Charlie where I carried my money, and that I always went to the farm on my birthday to collect the half-year's rent. What an arrant old fool I've been!"

A conclusion in which Mrs. Mainwaring perfectly coincided!

After the old gentleman had gone, Mrs. Mainwaring came over to the couch on which Hester was sitting—pale, trembling, and evidently much agitated, and took her hand.

"My dear," she said, "to whom did you pay that midnight visit?"

Hester made a quick gesture of negation, but her mother was not to be put off so easily.

"You must tell me, Hester; it is your duty. Moreover, I insist on knowing!"

"It is better that you should not, mother! indeed it is!" the girl exclaimed, earnestly; but Mrs. Mainwaring simply repeated her demand, and in a tone that was sufficient evidence of her determination to solve the mystery.

"Very well," Hester said at last, with a sort of helpless desperation. "Since you are resolved, I suppose you must be answered. I went"—her voice fell to a whisper—"to watch outside Colonel Wharton's lodge. I heard he was dying!"

She stopped, and put her hand to her throat.

"Hester!" Mrs. Mainwaring exclaimed, sharply, while she seized her daughter by the wrist, "you love this man!"

Hester made no reply; but by this time great heartrending sobs were shaking her delicate body. The whole desolate misery of her position came over her like a wave, and she was too physically weak to resist it.

Mrs. Mainwaring watched her for a few minutes in silence, some inkling of the truth breaking in upon her.

Whatever her faults—and they were many—she was passionately attached to her children, especially Hester. It is true she had sacrificed the girl to a fancied good, but it had been with a worldly woman's mistaken idea of the value of wealth as a means to happiness.

"Hester, my darling!" she whispered presently, in shaken tones, "you must tell me what has taken place between you and Alec Wharton. Did he love you?"

"Yes—yes! Oh! I am sure he did!"

"And he asked you to marry him?"

"Yes!" in a very low voice.

"What parted you, then?"

Hester shook her head, and drew a little farther from her mother. There was a subtle change in her manner, a shade of coldness, which the elder woman was quick to perceive.

"I decline to tell you! Nothing in the world shall induce me to tell you!"

Mrs. Mainwaring's thoughts went rapidly back to the time intervening between Mrs.

Lepell's garden-party and the twenty-fourth of July.

She recollected one or two visits from Colonel Wharton, but they ceased suddenly after the arrival of Miss Sandford. And, curiously enough, Miss Sandford, who had openly announced, on the day of her unexpected appearance at Beechwood, that her principal reason for leaving London was her desire to see Colonel Wharton, had never afterwards so much as mentioned his name.

Was there any connection between these two circumstances?

Quite suddenly Mrs. Mainwaring's face changed—blanched to a deadly pallor. Yes, there was a connection between these circumstances, and now she thought she saw it.

"Hester, had Miss Sandford anything to do with parting you and Colonel Wharton?"

Hester's silence was answer sufficient.

Mrs. Mainwaring got up, and paced the room in uncontrollable agitation.

After a few minutes she came back to her seat again.

"I see it all now!" she said, with a gesture of despair. "Edith Sandford was once in love with Alec herself, and she was always jealous of you! It was she who came between you, making you the innocent victim of your mother's sin; and for my sake you have kept silence! Oh, Hester! Hester! I thought once that evil was justified that good might come! I see my error now! Evil is always evil, and it brings with it its own retribution!"

The next day the following letter reached Colonel Wharton, at his club—the Army and Navy:—

"Dear Colonel Wharton,

"You will doubtless be surprised at receiving a communication from me, but I am anxious that you should learn the whole of the facts connected with my daughter Hester's marriage, and it is in your own interest as well as hers that you should hear the truth.

"I will be as brief as I can, for the subject is painful—how painful you will guess when you have finished reading this.

"When Hester was just seventeen she and I stayed together at an hotel in Buxton, and there we met old Mr. James Seagrave. He took a great fancy to my daughter, who was gentle and kind, read to him occasionally, and gave him her arm to lean on when he walked out—for he was at this time lame, and suffering from rheumatism.

"After awhile he told me he had no near relations, and very much disliked his house-keeper, a certain Miss Sandford, and finally offered to adopt Hester and make her his heiress.

"I took time for consideration, and meanwhile contrived to learn that he was an exceedingly rich man, and that he had an affection of the heart which must prove fatal in the course of two or three years.

"I finally consented to his proposal, and, accordingly, Hester and I went back home with him; but before long he grew restlessly afraid that Hester would leave him to be married, and nothing I could say would convince him to the contrary.

"He suggested at last that he and she should go through a form of marriage, simply as a satisfaction to him that no one else could claim her, and he told me at the same time that he knew it was quite impossible he could live more than a year or two.

"Hester refused to listen to the suggestion, from which she naturally recoiled, even though she knew that it would be a mere matter of form.

"However, I used all my influence to persuade her, and at length she yielded a reluctant consent.

"I make no secret of the fact that mercenary considerations swayed me. All my life long I have suffered from the bitterest form of poverty—that which hides itself from the world under the guise of gentility! And from this I resolved to save my children if possible.

(Continued on page 355.)

# KENNETH'S CHOICE

By Florence Hodgkinson

(Author of "Dolly's Legacy," "Ivy's Peril," "Guy Forrester's Secret," &c., &c.)

## SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

In the prologue we are told how Andrew Gordon came to be arrested for the suspected murder of his old master, Mr. Trevlyn, of Trevlyn and Marks, and that the sudden shock caused his death the same night that he was arrested. Andrew Gordon was living in the East End of London at the time, and a few days before his arrest had taken as lodger Margaret Lyon, with her child. It so happened that Andrew recognised Margaret as having called upon Mr. Trevlyn. Both women have lost their husbands, and each is left with a young child.

Twenty years have gone by, and Lord Combermere, conscious of his approaching end, has named Kenneth St. Clune (who succeeds to the title) heir to the vast estate of Combermere on condition that he marries, on or before her twenty-first birthday, Margaret Helena, only child of Noel St. Clune. Kenneth has no intention of allowing himself to be coerced into marrying a woman he has never seen.

Nell Ainslie, née Marsh, determines to try and earn her own living, and makes the acquaintance of Bruce Carew, an artist at the top of his profession, who offers her employment. She is subsequently adopted into Mrs. Ainslie's family. Nell's sister, Queenie, has become secretly betrothed to Austin Brooks, but on learning that she is a St. Clune and with the possibility of becoming Lady Combermere, poor Austin is neglected; but he is so blindly in love that he does not see the change in her.

Kenneth, alas for him, loves the blue-eyed girl, Nell Ainslie, as his own soul. Dared he marry her, since the man of whose murder her father died accused was his mother's husband. The time is fast approaching when, unless Kenneth carries out the conditions of Lord Combermere's will, he will remain a comparatively poor man.

## CHAPTER XIV.

**M**ARION AINSLIE was a good woman and an accomplished one, but she was essentially narrow-minded. It is quite possible for a woman to be amiable and sweet-tempered in her home life; for her to play and sing as an artiste, and be able to discuss the latest books and newest pictures with culture and judgment. It is quite possible she may be able to do all this, and yet be as thoroughly narrow-minded as the most uneducated of her sex.

This narrow-mindedness in the case of a refined woman will not show on the surface. You may be intimate with her for years without suspecting the defect. It is only when her sympathy is called for—for someone suffering from some combination of circumstances utterly beyond her experience—that you come in contact with her weak point. She cannot put herself in the place of the sufferer; she clings to the old prejudices of her sex, and believes firmly that to have a "history," to be the victim of any trouble out of the recognised list of calamities, is not so much a misfortune as a crime.

Perhaps, of all who knew Mrs. Ainslie, no one but her brother thoroughly understood this phase of her character. He was very fond of her, but he had found out long ago it was impossible to enlarge her mind or sympathies.

Taken in her own groove she was charming. Try to draw her a step beyond, and she disappointed you at once.

Fortunately Hugh Ainslie was quite blind to this defect—a somewhat weak man. In his eyes his wife was perfect. He accepted her prejudices as facts; adopted her opinions as his own; and, without having the least suspicion of the truth, was the most docile and best-managed husband in London.

If they had had children this might have been altered. Mother-love might have given to Marion the quality she lacked; but no children came, and she grew year by year more entrenched in her prejudices; therefore, it was with a very real anxiety Bruce Carew

saw the pretty child who reminded him so forcibly of his fair dead love take her place at Oakley Cottage as an adopted daughter of the Ainslies.

But all went so well at first he was almost convinced his fears were groundless. Nell seemed to fill a vacant niche that had been waiting for her. Mr. and Mrs. Ainslie loved her fondly, and did their best to make her happy. If the girl failed to find the rôle of a young lady of fortune fill up her life; if there were hours when she had dreams of art and of a career of honest labour crowned at last by fame and honour, the fault was none of theirs. She had every pleasure, every care and luxury they would have given to a daughter of their own, and she repaid them by an affection and gratitude as sincere as warm.

Bruce Carew, watching them carefully, decided the adoption had been a success after all; and when, later on, he discovered the secret Kenneth St. Clune was yet unconscious of, he regarded little Nell's future as secured.

Lord Combermere was not the man to give his hand without his heart. He would awake to the knowledge his love was Nell's, and decline the brilliant match arranged for him by his kinsman.

Mr. and Mrs. Ainslie, who had an admiration for rank Bruce could never understand, would rejoice to see their adopted child a Countess. With the portion they would certainly give her, the reversion of the artist's savings (Mr. Carew had made a will, leaving all he possessed to little Nell), and the legacy the Dowager Countess was sure to leave to her favourite, Kenneth, the young couple, if poor for a peer and peeress, would yet have ample for a bright home-life.

Bruce gave a sigh of satisfaction as he mapped out Nell's future, and was delighted it looked so fair.

Alas! for human designs. As he was on the point of leaving for England with the Ainslies, a letter was put into Carew's hands from an old friend and fellow-artist, who had gone to Algiers for the winter, hoping to avert the terrible disease which threatened him.

He had taken the remedy too late. Consumption had laid its fell grip on him too surely to be conquered. He lay now, as he believed, dying, in a strange land, and he begged his old companion to come to him and give him the comfort of knowing a friend would close his eyes.

There was, there could be, no hesitation about the answer. A few words of explanation to his sister and her husband, a rapid sorting of his effects from theirs, and half-an-hour afterwards Bruce stood alone on the platform gazing anxiously after the train which had borne away the three people dearest to him in the world.

"I could not refuse poor Geoff!" he muttered to himself. "and yet I feel strangely uneasy. I should like to have been in London when Combermere speaks to the child—and speak he will, I feel pretty sure, before many days are over. I only hope Marion won't get on her stilts because I introduced him to her as plain Mr. St. Clune. At least, I shouldn't care if she were annoyed with me, but I don't want her to vent her vexation on Nell. After all, I don't see she has any cause to grumble. He was travelling as 'Mr. St. Clune.' But for the accident of my knowing him and of Nell having seen him once before, we should have been no wiser than Marion, and she would have made an unbearable fuss if she had known the intimate friend and cavalier was an English nobleman."

This last was strictly true. Bruce Carew, to whom the noblest houses in Belgravia

were open, thought but little of titles. His sister, who had lived almost entirely in the world of art and Bohemia (which, though to my mind far more charming, are yet not Belgravia), set an almost inordinate value on rank.

If she had known Kenneth's title she would have "fussed" over him so much as to spoil all his pleasant visits, yet with her tenacious, jealous temperament to keep the secret from her had been rash; and Bruce Carew had never realised how rash until he stood alone in Paris, knowing that the next day would find the Ainslies and Kenneth within three miles of each other, while he himself, far on his way to Africa, would be powerless to control the course of events.

"She ought not to be vexed," he persisted in thinking, going over the same arguments again and again in his vain attempt to allay his fears. "If I had taken a plain commoner and introduced him to her as a belted Earl, she might have grumbled, but as it is she has nothing to complain of."

Oakley Cottage was quite ready to receive its owner, and Martha Price gave a warm welcome to "Miss Ainslie." She always regarded Nell in a measure as her property, and was honestly as fond of her as though she had known her from childhood. They all went to bed early, tired out with their journey, and it was only on the morrow that the first cloud came that had darkened Nell's horizon since she left Marden.

She was glancing over the newspapers when a paragraph in the *Morning Post* caught her eye, and she was thankful that Mrs. Ainslie's back was towards her, so that she could not see the death-like pallor which crept over her features.

"The Earl of Combermere is rapidly advancing towards convalescence. The thief, in conflict with whom his lordship received the injuries which have confined him to the house for the last fortnight, remains undiscovered, though the police have taken urgent measures for his apprehension. Lord Combermere remains the guest of the Countess Dowager at her residence in Cadogan Place, and it is rumoured that a marriage between him and her grand-daughter, the Honourable Margaret St. Clune, will shortly be arranged."

Poor little Nell!

Kenneth has learned his secret abruptly and painfully; but surely her awakening was to the full as cruel! She had, as a perfect stranger, to learn from the public papers of his illness, then when the blow had taught her he was her life's love, she had to hear the news that he would shortly marry her fostersister. The girl she had been brought up to sacrifice her own wishes to all her years, who had usurped her place in her mother's heart, and since that mother's death had treated her with a scornful silence, which buried past benefits and years of sisterly love in utter oblivion!

"Kenneth will marry Queenie! She will be his wife!" The thought was like a dagger through the girl's breast. In her innocence, in her girlish humility, she never dreamed of herself as a fitting wife for the Earl of Combermere; but that he should marry Queenie, a girl who all her life had scoffed at love—who regarded marriage as a stepping-stone to wealth—who had accepted Austin Brooks's honest heart, and cast it aside as a broken toy, when she found herself able to enter into society of a higher rank! That this girl who, if she had an angel's face, had yet proved herself destitute of gratitude, truth, affection, or pity, should be Kenneth St. Clune's wife, was a blow which pierced Nell's very heart. And she must hide her feelings; she might not even indulge in the luxury of a good cry in her own room. She had been told to look over the paper and see what was interesting; and any minute Mrs. Ainslie might turn round and proclaim she was ready to listen to Nell's selection of the morning's news. She might not, poor girl, ever speak of the man who had never been her lover; but must always remain her love! It would have been a relief to her to speak his name; to say, as though speaking of some casual acquaintance, "Lord Combermere has





THE FIRST CLOUD.

had an encounter with a thief, but is getting better. The paper hints he will marry his cousin!"

But, alas! even this was impossible, since Mrs. Ainslie knew their late intimate only as plain Mr. St. Clune, and would be put out at having been kept in the dark if Nell attempted to explain.

"I am quite ready," said Mrs. Ainslie, looking up from her accounts, and closing her books. "Is there anything interesting? Why," catching sight of her face, "what on earth have you been doing with yourself? You look like a ghost, child!"

Poor Nell! What excuse to make she had no idea.

"It is very hot!" she ventured. "I think that must be it! I feel quite giddy!"

Mrs. Ainslie bent over her in real anxiety.

"Your hands are as cold as ice. As to the room being hot, I am so chilly I was just going to order a fire! Nell, what is the matter with you? Your teeth are chattering, and you tremble like an aspen leaf!"

"It is nothing!" said the girl, bravely, trying to still her shaking limbs by sheer force of will. "I seemed to turn giddy quite suddenly. If you really do not mind I will go and lie down, and then I shall be ready to go shopping with you this afternoon!"

"And do try and get a little colour in your cheeks, child! You are like a little ghost!"

Left alone she not unreasonably took up the paper, deciding as Nell would not be able to read to her, she might as well skim its contents for herself. She, too, read the paragraph about Lord Combermere, and wondered what relationship existed between him and the young man who had been so much with them in Paris.

"Bruce has known Kenneth St. Clune for years, and I always understood he was Lord Combermere's heir. Well, if the Earl gets well and marries, there'll be an end of his dreams! A pity, too, for he's a nice young man, so pleasant-spoken and attentive, too! I really

fancied at one time he was falling in love with Nell! It would have been a grand thing for the child, cousin to an Earl and Countess, that's what she'd have been; quite a rise in life for her, for though Mrs. Marsh was one of the sweetest women I ever met I don't think she came of a high family. I wonder what Nell's father was, by the way? I never asked her!"

The girl came down a little paler than usual! but otherwise with no traces of the morning's illness. Mrs. Ainslie carried out her intention, and inquired as to the calling of the late Mr. Marsh.

"I always think, you know, dear, he must have been an artist! You have such a taste for painting, you see!"

"I have no idea of what he was! Mother never would speak of him. He died when I was a baby!"

"But you surely found some clue to his history among your mother's papers? Letters, you know, tell a great deal!"

For the first time since her mother's death Nell remembered the carefully-locked desk, and the large painted trunk which had both been such objects of her childish awe.

"I never had any of mother's papers!" she said, slowly. "Queenie was the eldest, and she took possession of them!"

"That was natural at first, when she believed herself your sister; but later on when you knew she was no relation you should have claimed them!"

"I did. She told me they all related to her parents, and that there was nothing concerning me except one packet addressed to Mr. Ashwin. I asked him about it, but he only said it had better remain in his care."

"I know Mr. Ashwin well by name," said Mrs. Ainslie, curiously; "but I can't understand his acting like that at all!"

"I think he considered himself my guardian. I know he was very, very kind to mother, and that he told me to come to him if ever I needed a friend."

"You are not likely to need one," said Mrs. Ainslie, a little condescendingly. "Our daughter will not require a stranger's good offices; but, for all that, Nell, I don't think you ought to continue in such ignorance of your own family history. Some day you had better write to Mr. Ashwin for those papers."

"I had much rather not!"

"Why?"

"Mr. Ashwin knows Queenie's relations, and I don't want to do anything that could bring me into contact with them."

"You are as good as they are!" said Mrs. Ainslie, complacently. "As our daughter, you take our standing, you know!"

But she was honestly fond of the girl, and would not urge her against her wishes; so that it came to pass the letter to Mr. Ashwin was still unwritten, when, some ten days later, a young lady walked up the garden path of Oakley Cottage, and when Martha Price answered her summons, asked to see Mrs. Ainslie on business of great importance.

Martha's thoughts involuntarily went back to a similar request made by another girl little more than a year before; but there was little resemblance between the two visitors. This one was dressed in the most elegant black walking toilet, and the feathers in her hat must alone have cost something considerable. She spoke with the air of one accustomed to be obeyed, and did not take Martha's heart by storm as had done that other black-robed visitor of a year ago.

Mrs. Ainslie was at home, and the trim parlour-maid made no difficulty about her being seen. Ushering the young lady into the drawing-room, she asked what name she should tell her mistress.

The visitor handed her a card, inscribed the "Honourable Margaret St. Clune," and repeated her request to see Mrs. Ainslie *alone*, laying such a stress on the word that Martha felt quite annoyed.

"You're sure to do that, Miss," she said,

quietly, "for the master and Miss Ainslie is out for the day."

Mrs. Ainslie glanced at the card, and stared. Although not "in" aristocratic society she knew perfectly its etiquette was infringed by a young unmarried girl coming alone to call on a perfect stranger. Evidently this visit had a deeper meaning than mere ceremony.

"What can it be?" pondered Mrs. Ainslie, as she smoothed her hair. "Can she have heard of our kindness to young St. Clune abroad, and have come to thank me? Hardly, for if she is going to marry the Earl she can't feel any very particular interest in his cousin."

When Marion Ainslie entered her own drawing-room, her visitor advanced to meet her with outstretched hand.

"Dear Mrs. Ainslie, have you quite forgotten me?" was the question spoken, with a winning smile.

Mrs. Ainslie started. There was something familiar both in face and voice; but, at the same time, she could tax her memory with no knowledge of Miss St. Clune, and she said as much, gracefully.

"But I was not Margaret St. Clune then, in the days when you knew me. I was only Queenie Marsh."

The best of us are but mortal. Mrs. Ainslie had never particularly affected Queenie Marsh in her old days. Since then she had denounced her warmly for her neglect of Nell; but now, seeing her in her glory as a beauty and an heiress, greeting her as the grandchild of a Countess, Mrs. Ainslie's sentiments imperceptibly changed, and she decided she had always liked Queenie; that no doubt her seeming unkindness to Nell could be explained, and it was a very pretty, graceful attention this coming alone and unattended to see her friend of other days.

"To think of your being Miss St. Clune!" she exclaimed. "Nell might have told me!"

"It was natural she should not care to talk of me since we parted under very painful circumstances!"

"Well, as to that," said Mrs. Ainslie, with a little lack of feeling which did not jar on Queenie as it would have done on Nell, "no one could have expected Mrs. Marsh to have a long life; and, really, her death seems to have opened up a brighter time for both you and Nell, for it must be pleasanter to live here as an adopted child than to struggle in poverty at Mardon!"

"To be sure; but I did not mean only Mrs. Marsh's death. Is it possible you do not know the real reason why Nell and I parted?"

"You were not sisters, and your grandmother naturally wished for you, while Nell had no claim upon her. We did think at the time, considering the years Mrs. Marsh had cared for you, something might have been done for Nell, but no doubt the Countess knew best."

Queenie opened her eyes with genuine surprise written in their depths, or, at least, what seemed so to Mrs. Ainslie.

"Don't you know my grandmother offered to settle five thousand pounds on Nell in consideration for her mother's care of me?"

"No, I never heard it! And the child refused? What could have made her so ungracious?"

"She said my grandmother, or, rather, her family, had been instrumental in her father's death, and she would never touch a penny of their money."

"But she does not remember her father? She does not even know the cause of his death!"

"Poor girl!" said Queenie, pityingly, "she only learned it when her mother's papers were examined. It was a painful moment for us both! We had been brought up as sisters, and though the discovery made it quite impossible I should ever be able to show my affection for her by having her with me, yet I have never ceased to care for her, and pity her deeply for the burden of unmerited disgrace which had fallen on her!"

"You are speaking in riddles to me!" said Mrs. Ainslie, petulantly. "Of course I know Mrs. Marsh's daughter could not be the equal of Lady Combermere's grandchild; but I do not see what disgrace rests on her!"

"It ought not so to rest," said Queenie, sweetly. "It is not her fault; but the sins of the fathers are visited on the children, and there are few people who would willingly associate with a murderer's daughter!"

Mrs. Ainslie was pale with emotion. She listened breathlessly to all Queenie could tell her. Be very sure Andrew Gordon's guilt was painted in its blackest colours, that the barest chance of his innocence was not admitted. Even his widow's adoption of Queenie was not allowed to pass as an act of merit. It was natural revenge on the family whose prosecution had led to her husband's sudden death which led Mrs. Marsh to keep their heiress aloof from them, and bring her up in poverty.

To hear Miss St. Clune you would have believed that from her birth her noble relations had been seeking her, and that only the persistence with which Mrs. Marsh kept her hidden prevented their finding her.

Marion Ainslie listened as a creature in a dream. Deep and bitter was her anger. She who prided herself on her discernment as being a judge of character had been completely deceived. She had been from first to last the tool of an ambitious, scheming girl; and she of a murderer to the world as her adopted had actually been led to introduce the daughter child!

"I shall be grateful to you always, my dear Miss St. Clune!" she said, taking Queenie's hand effusively. "I shall never forget your kindness in coming to unmask this shameless girl's hypocrisy!"

"But I did not come for that at all," said Queenie, simply. "I have no wish to injure Nell; I can't forget the long years I loved her as a sister. I came here to ask you to help me in a sad trouble which threatens me."

"I am sure I shall be delighted!" said Mrs. Ainslie, and she really meant it. "Anything that I can do I shall be only too glad, though how you can possibly be in trouble I cannot imagine!"

"I think you know my cousin, the Earl of Combermere?"

Mrs. Ainslie shook her head.

"I have never met Lord Combermere, of course," and here she smiled meaningly. "I know that the world says he is soon to be more than a cousin to you."

"And the world is right," said Margaret, speaking the lie with perfect composure. "Ever since my grandfather's death the engagement has been desired by all our friends. It is Lady Combermere's darling wish. And, as for me, Mrs. Ainslie, I love him with all my heart; and it is my greatest happiness to know I am his betrothed!"

"But how can I help you?" cried Mrs. Ainslie. "I, who have never seen the Earl?"

"He is engaged to me," said Margaret, sadly; "the matter was settled months ago; but my grandfather had not long been dead; it was too early to speak of our wedding. Kenneth went abroad, and there, I have too much reason to fear, his heart was stolen from me! Mrs. Ainslie, forgive me if I come to you under a mistake, but I heard while in Paris he was constantly at your house, and I thought the syren who had stolen his heart from me was Helena Marsh!"

It all came back to Mrs. Ainslie then. Nell's illness the morning when the paragraph in the paper alluded to Lord Combermere, her preoccupation when they had tried to guess the Earl's exact relation to their friend Kenneth St. Clune! Could greater proof be needed?

Miss St. Clune went on.

"I am his plighted wife, but, for his own sake, I would give up my claims on him if it were for his happiness; but *even* this infatuation make him happy? I am certain he is in

love with Nell. He may have dropped his title abroad, and travelled under his family name of St. Clune. He spoke of her to me once, and his words implied he knew her well."

"True enough, Mr. St. Clune was almost always with us," admitted Mrs. Ainslie; "but I never guessed—I never dreamed—he was the Earl of Combermere! And that wicked girl, not content with deceiving us, must needs try and rob you of your lover!"

"If it were only that I should not mind!" said Queenie, simply. "So that he was happy I would be content; but, Mrs. Ainslie, this union seems to me against the laws of Heaven and man. There is to me something revolting in the child of the murderer entering his victim's family! Unless he marries me, Lord Combermere must always be a poor man! I do not think poverty would harm him, but his noble head could never hold itself up again if dishonour fell upon his name!"

"I hope you are alarming yourself, needlessly!" said Mrs. Ainslie, earnestly. "If he is engaged to you, surely the other must have been a mere idle flirtation. He could not break his word—to you!"

"But he knows I love him—that I would sacrifice my own happiness to his! Mrs. Ainslie, I have come to you this afternoon to implore your help. Only at your house can my lover meet my rival; be merciful to me, and save Kenneth from his infatuation. Don't let the shadow of crime rest on the coronet of Combermere!"

"It shall not," cried Mrs. Ainslie, eagerly. "I promise it you. Lord Combermere and Nell shall never meet here again."

Miss St. Clune made a few grateful speeches and took her leave. She had gained all she wanted. Her childish recollections of Mrs. Ainslie and her present impressions alike told her she would be staunch to her promise. Nell would be sacrificed. The very love the childish woman had had would turn to gall now. She believed she had deceived her. On Nell would the punishment fall. But when Miss St. Clune laid her head that night on her down pillows she never thought of the girl whose future she had wrecked.

Margaret was selfish to the core. She loved Kenneth, and she meant to marry him, no matter whose heart she trampled on to reach her end. Her one feeling, as her eyes closed, was that of intense satisfaction that when Lord Combermere presented himself at Oakley Cottage on Monday he would find the bird he came to seek flown.

Martha Price had been quite correct in telling Margaret St. Clune that both Mr. Ainslie and his adopted daughter were out for the day; but she had not intended to infer they were out together. As a fact, the artist had gone on the Thames for a fishing expedition with some friends, and would most likely spend the night at their cosy quarters at Sunbury. Nell, on the contrary, had gone to Peckham—almost a long journey from the Fulham Road—to inquire into the character of a cook Mrs. Ainslie thought likely to suit them. As she had but just started a few minutes before Miss St. Clune called, and it was then four o'clock, it was hardly exaggeration to say she was out for the day.

The parlour-maid was very fond of Nell, and she was in her room putting away a few trifles the girl had left about when she saw the visitor depart, accompanied to the very gate by Mrs. Ainslie herself.

"I hope the mistress didn't ring and I not hear her!" was Martha's reflection. "She don't often go to the gate with anyone. There's the bell now!"

She had been with Mrs. Ainslie a long time, and had seen her occasionally out of temper, but she had never seen her look as she did now. There was a dark cloud on the usually gentle face, and the very voice shook with anger.

"What time will Miss Marsh be back?" It was the first time she had spoken of the girl by that name since she came to be the



sunshine of Oakley Cottage. At first it had been "Miss Nell," lately "Miss Ainslie," or "my daughter."

"At seven, ma'am," said Martha, wondering what was amiss. "You ordered high tea instead of dinner, as the master was out."

"And it is now not quite six," looking at her watch. "Martha, you are a quick packer; go upstairs and put all Miss Marsh's things together. Get them all packed, if possible, before she returns."

Martha felt bewildered.

"Is Miss Nell going on a visit, ma'am?" she asked, with the privileged familiarity of an old servant.

"She is going away. I have been grossly deceived in her. She leaves this house to-night, and when she is gone I will never hear her name mentioned."

"But what has she done, ma'am?"

"That is no business of yours!"

"But Mr. Carew, ma'am, he sets such store by Miss Nell! What will he say when he comes back from the Africa and finds her gone?"

"I will see to that."

Martha made one last effort.

"Miss Nell's been with us nearly a month, ma'am," she said, respectfully; "and you've never had an unkind thought of her before. Don't you think if it's anything the lady that's just gone told you, you might trust Miss Nell's word before hers, seeing she's a stranger?"

"She is Lady Combermere's grandchild!"

"Very likely, ma'am; but Miss Nell's herself. You don't need to ask her family; you just look at her and know she's a lady!"

"Will you pack those things," demanded her mistress, "and leave off talking about what does not concern you?"

There was nothing for it but to obey. Martha went back to Nell's pretty bedroom with a heavy heart. Meanwhile, unconscious of the storm that awaited her, utterly unrecking that a crisis in her young life had come, Nell transacted the business which had taken her to Peckham very much to her own satisfaction, and hurried back to Fulham with all speed, because she thought Mrs. Ainslie must be feeling dull after her long, lonely afternoon.

Martha opened the door, and, to Nell's dismay, her eyes were red with crying.

"What is the matter?" asked Nell, gently. "You must have had bad news, Martha!"

"Don't trouble about me, Miss Nell!" said the parlour-maid, sadly. "The mistress is in the drawing-room, and she wants you to go to her at once."

There was no third at the interview which followed. It always dwelt in Nell's mind as the most wretched half-hour of her life. Mrs. Ainslie had recovered from her first wild anger; her displeasure was sterner and more vindictive, even if calmer and less violent.

Very briefly she told the girl the story of her parentage, and how it made her an unfit associate for honourable people. The sting was the accusation that followed, for Mrs. Ainslie insisted that Nell knew this, and had wilfully deceived her.

"I see now why you were unwilling to write to Mr. Ashwin for your mother's papers! Why you tried to set me against that sweet girl, Miss St. Clune. You were afraid they might unwittingly betray your secret!—the secret your foster-sister would have kept to her dying day but for your abominable conduct!"

It dawned on Nell slowly that she had Queenie to thank for this awful scene. That the girl who all their joint lives had been preferred before her had not scrupled, in the height of her own power and happiness, to do her best to wreck Nell's life.

"What abominable conduct!" she asked, sadly. "Surely you will tell me that?"

"Can you look me in the face, and deny

you knew the young man we were introduced to as Mr. St. Clune was Lord Combermere?"

"I should never seek to deny it. I knew he was Lord Combermere!"

"And deceived me by calling him Mr. St. Clune, that I might fancy your intimacy harmless?"

Nell's eyes flashed like fire.

"It was harmless!" she cried. "The Earl of Combermere never spoke a word to me or I to him the whole world might not have overheard!"

"His future wife thinks otherwise! She came here to-day with tears in her eyes, to beg me to save him from his miserable infatuation. Her own lover, her own hopes of happiness, she could willingly sacrifice; but she could not bear that a murderer's daughter should wear her grandmother's coronet, and the shadow of guilt stain the escutcheon of the St. Clunes."

Nell rose to her feet—she stood like some wounded animal suddenly brought to bay.

"And you believed her?"

"Of course!"

"You had known me for months!" pleaded Nell, unconsciously repeating Martha's argument. "You might have trusted me a little!"

"How could I trust a murderer's child? Crime is mostly hereditary. Why, if my husband or I crossed your wishes, you might be helping us quietly out of the world some day!"

"Oh, hush!" cried the girl, fairly stung to madness by this taunt. "In a very few minutes I will leave you. I promise you you shall be free of me for ever. Don't torture me more. Heaven only knows what I am suffering now!"

"You understand me, then? I am quite resolved you shall leave; but appeal to my husband will be useless. I could never live beneath the same roof as you again!"

Once more that strange, flashing indignation in the girl's beautiful eyes.

"And do you think that I could stay? Do you fancy after the taunts you have heaped on me to-night I could ever take aught from you again? I will go forth into the world alone. I will leave behind all you have given me, and take only the things I brought from Marden. I shall never forget I owe you months of happiness; it is only that thought that has kept me patient under your cruel insults to-night!"

She swept upstairs more like an offended princess than an unmasked deceiver. Very gently she put aside Martha's preparations, unlocked a drawer, and proceeded to pack its contents into a shabby carpet bag. She dressed herself in the well-worn cashmere in which Kenneth St. Clune had seen her first, then she took the bag and went downstairs.

The drawing-room door was closed; but the weeping Martha was in the hall. Nell sent no message to Mr. Ainslie, the man she had been told to think of as her adopted father. Not for worlds would she have made dissension between husband and wife; but before ever she was called "Miss Ainslie," Bruce Carew, the famous artist, had been her friend; him she could not, would not, leave without a farewell word!

"Tell Mr. Carew, please Martha," she said, gently, "that I have gone away. He had better forget all about me, for I don't think we shall ever meet again; but tell him I have done nothing I am ashamed of, nothing that he would blame me for, and that till my dying day I shall remember him!"

Another moment and the gate of Oakley Cottage had closed behind her! Little Nell was a lonely wanderer in the wide, wide world!

(To be continued next week.)

(This story commenced in No. 2010. Back numbers can be obtained through any News-agent.)

## A Romance of

## Entrancing Interest

ENTITLED

# Lord of Her Love

BY

EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

AUTHOR OF

"Unseen Fires,"

"Woman Against Woman,"

&c., &c.,

WILL BE COMMENCED IN THE NEXT  
NUMBER OF

The London Reader

The characters in Miss Rowlands' story are sketched with the deft and effective touches of a master hand, and stand out clearly before the reader. Two of the leading personages have contracted a

### CLANDESTINE MARRIAGE

and it presently becomes evident that the husband is not what he appears to be. By degrees his real nature is revealed as that of

### A SELFISH, HEARTLESS, TRICKSTER

and it stands out in marked contrast with the noble attributes of the hero, who is

### LORD OF HER LOVE

This distinction becomes strikingly apparent in the opening chapters, and is but one of many exciting and curiosity-arousing episodes which figure in the story. It is full of dramatic action, and enchains the attention from the beginning until the unexpected denouement.

## THE GOLDEN HOPE

### SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS

Lady Redwoode, the owner and undisputed proprietor of all the fair domain of Redwoode, has been left a widow a year or more previous to the opening of the story. Lord Redwoode left no heir, but expressed a wish that on the decease of his wife the estates should pass to their nephew, Andrew Forsythe, and never doubted Lady Redwoode's compliance with his wishes. Mr. Forsythe was missing over many things, and wondering what would happen to him should his aunt marry again. Judge then of his surprise when Lady Redwoode tells him the story of her early life. Secretly married when quite a girl, in order not to arouse the anger of her brother, with whom she was living in India, there came a day when it was necessary to tell all, and the scene that followed caused Lady Redwoode to fall into convulsions, and she lay ill for many weeks. On returning to life and consciousness, it was to find herself a widow and a mother.

Sir Richard Haughton, although but twenty-seven, has lost all joy in life through an unhappy marriage. News is brought to him that his divorced wife, Margaret Sorel, is dying, and the messenger eagerly began an interview on the pretext that Margaret desires Sir Richard's forgiveness. Margaret fails to rekindle the old love, and swears that no other woman shall ever become his wife.

Now Lady Redwoode's brother is dead, and as an act of reparation has sent all the necessary proofs of her first marriage, but the secret of the identity of her own child dies with him. The two girls are coming to England, and it is for Lady Redwoode to discover which of the two is her daughter. After a little hesitation in coming to so momentous a decision, the choice falls on Cecile, who at once sets to work to ingratiate herself with Lady Redwoode at the expense of her foster-sister Hellice, and in this she is ably seconded by the Hindoo ayah. Cecile's relationship is proclaimed to the assembled household; and to Hellice, who watches this rejoicing without one pang of envy, there suddenly comes a feeling of loneliness, and she turns unobserved into the garden to seek comfort among the shade of the trees. It is thus that she discovers Sir Richard Haughton, who for one moment gazes on the lovely vision as it is lost to view. "I must see her again," he says, "Whoever and whatever she is I recognise her as my fate."

### CHAPTER XIV. (Continued).

"**T**HAT is not true, Renee!" interrupted Hellice. "Cecile was always nearer and dearer to my parents than I was. It was she whom they petted and loved, and not me!"

"They were remorseful because they had so wronged her," declared the ayah, in her plausible tones, and with downcast eyes.

"But I was your foster-child, too, Renee!" said Hellice. "You have not given the true reason of your devotion to Cecile."

"If I must tell the truth, I must!" exclaimed the woman, suddenly, and with assured frankness. "It is not my heart that rules my actions, but my interest. Cecile is wealthy, and can give my grandchild and me a home during our lives. But for her we should be poor and homeless. So, I have courted her, have affected a love for her, have waited upon her like her slave. She believes in my devotion and will shower benefits upon me and mine!"

Hellice was not deceived by this explanation. She knew well the artfulness of her reputed relative, and she weighed carefully the fact that Renee's eyes did not meet hers openly and in frankness.

"I desire no benefits at the hands of Cecile, if they are to be won by deceit, Renee," she said, and her sweet voice took a tone of sternness. "I want no benefits at all at her hands, and I will accept none if they are prompted by a belief in your pretended affection for her. But I know your affection for her is real, not pretended. You cannot deceive me. It may have sprung originally from self-interest, but I cannot believe even that!"

"What do you think, then?" asked the woman, doggedly.

"I do not know—I can scarcely tell. I am utterly bewildered!" and Hellice looked up with dreary eyes and quivering lips. "Renee, I am alone and a stranger in a strange land. Cecile has come to a heart that loves her, to a warm, sheltering home, to friends and kindred. I am only tolerated here. No one's face brightens at my approach; no heart lightens when I draw near. Renee, open your

heart to me. Give me a home in your affection!"

She turned a pleading gaze towards the ayah, who answered neither by look nor word, not knowing what to say.

There was a brief pause, and Hellice exclaimed,

"You are not of my kindred, or you would not be deaf to my appeal. The tie of blood between us would make itself felt when I call out to you in my desolation. We are not akin. We have not one feature in common. Nature has failed to establish any resemblance between us."

She sprang from her cushions, with a quick, unexpected bound, dashed across the floor, her Indian shawl trailing after her over the carpet like a stream of scarlet and gold, and poised herself before a long mirror that was niched between two windows.

She compared the picture that met her gaze with the downcast face of the ayah.

Bright, beautiful, and blooming, with radiant eyes and scarlet lips, with a white brow from which rippled away dusky masses of hair, that in its present dishevelment resembled a storm-cloud, with a delicately dark complexion, so transparent that the rich blood shone redly through, there was a tropical luxuriousness in her loveliness, but nothing Asiatic. Soresly, all that perfect beauty could not have sprung from an inferior race, since it was instinct with the rarest intelligence and the utmost delicacy of soul and refinement of character. These thoughts did not occur to Hellice, for she was too exquisitely modest to entertain them, and she was seeking only for some point of resemblance to her reputed grandmother. But eagerly as she sought she sought in vain. Even her anxious heart could not find in her face any likeness to the coarse, handsome countenance of the Hindoo, and she triumphed at her failure.

"We do not look alike, Renee!" she said, with a sudden and irrepressible gaiety. "You cannot point out the slightest similarity."

"See if you find any resemblance to Lady Redwoode!" suggested Renee, significantly.

Hellice looked again, and her face clouded. She knew herself to resemble as little the Saxon loveliness of Lady Redwoode as the ruddy coarseness of the Hindoo. If she had begun to cherish any secret hopes that to her and not to Cecile belonged the right of claiming the Baroness by the sweetest and holiest of titles, those hopes were blighted by that last hurried glance.

She turned from the mirror with a swelling heart.

"I have been all wrong, Renee," she said, with a proud humility that lent new grace to her lovely character. "After all, I dare say I have aspired too high—have dreamed too much. I fancied because when Lady Redwoode drew near and my heart quickened its beatings almost to suffocation that some subtle instinct might be working within me. Well, the dream is over! I shall dream no more!"

She smiled wearily, and looked yearningly at her attendant, as if seeking comfort from her. But Renee eyed her stolidly, and said nothing.

"Perhaps I had better go away from Redwoode," continued the girl, musingly. "Not because Cecile desires my absence, but that Lady Redwoode's heart may be at rest. So long as I stay here she will have doubts between us. She cannot help it. Oh, why was papa so cruel? Why could he not have restored her child and trusted his to her generosity? Would it be better for me to go away and leave her ladyship in peace? If I were fully and beyond all doubt satisfied that Cecile—"

She paused, overcome with agitation, and looked beseechingly at Renee. As the latter

made no response, she sprang forward with a quick, impetuous movement, and knelt at the Hindoo's side, lifting up to her gaze a pale, passionate face.

"Renee," she cried, "speak to me truthfully. Am I indeed your grandchild? Did I derive my being from your daughter? Settle my doubts at once and for ever by a declaration of the truth."

"You are foolish, Hellice," answered the Asiatic, contemptuously. "You are my grand-daughter, my child's child! Shall I swear it?"

"It is true, then!" moaned Hellice. "I believe I had hoped—oh, grandmother, pity me, love me!"

It would have seemed that if one drop of Hellice's blood was in the ayah's heart it would have warmed her manner at that moment, and have inspired her with pity for her youthful descendant. It was true that she made an effort to respond to the girl's wild appeal, and that she drew Hellice to her bosom, but her manner was cold and heartless, and Hellice was not imposed upon by it.

The girl disentangled herself from that meaningless embrace, and arose, pale and cold, chilled to the heart, and shivering from physical sympathy, although the heat of sun and fire combined to render her chamber a perfect tropical bower.

"Go, Renee!" she said, drearily, and her voice sounded like a wail. "I wish to think over what you have said. Your presence disturbs me. Go!"

Despite her evident suffering, she spoke like a young empress, and the ayah did not care to disobey her. Muttering something to the effect that her grand-daughter exhibited little filial respect, she arose and retreated from the apartment, sending back a parting glance that was full of bitter malignity and revengefulness.

Unconscious of that glance, Hellice sank down upon a leopard skin before the fire, warmed her shivering frame and strove to calm her troubled, anxious heart. She did not allow herself to mourn over her shattered dream; she gave herself up to no vain regrets nor repinings; she had no thought of envying her cousin. Her great, generous soul craved nothing that belonged to another, and she would not have robbed Cecile of what was believed to be her rightful heritage. But she would have been more than human if she could have been content in her desolation; and more than woman if her heart had not cried out for some part of the love and sympathy lavished so freely upon others.

She struggled bravely to conquer her grief, and she succeeded. As her frame drooped before the fire, her soul lifted itself up in prayerfulness and hope, and a sweet calm brooded over her spirit. She arose, strengthened and warmed, and prepared to face her destiny, let it be what it would.

"I must not indulge myself," she thought. "I will dress myself and go downstairs. Tomorrow I may not be here. It is best for me to go away, and the sooner the better."

She engaged at once in her toilet, exchanging her morning robe for a dress of black flecked with gold, and, wrapping about her the shawl without which she seldom appeared, and which she required for warmth, after the torrid heats to which she had been all her life accustomed. She wore no jewels, and no ornaments, except a spray of coral at her throat and another in her hair, but her costume, when completed, was infinitely becoming.

Her task completed, she went into the drawing-room. She found it deserted, and passed into the music-room. That, too, was unoccupied.

She looked into the garden, but no one was there. Concluding that the members of the family were in Lady Redwoode's boudoir, and feeling a natural hesitancy to intrude where her presence might be undesired, she made her way to the conservatory—a beautiful and by no means small glass palace adjoining the drawing-room.

It was a charming spot to which she had



gained access, and one in which she had already beguiled many hours.

Flowers bloomed on every side in bewildering masses of colour and fragrance. Orange trees shrouded in white blooms, like fresh-fallen flakes of snow, poured out intoxicating sweetness on the air.

Tropical trees, presenting a wilderness of tangled vines and luxurious blossoms, abounded on every side. Delicate orchids grew there, attaching themselves to living vegetable supports, and gave forth their strange, animal-like flowers in wanton profuseness, challenging the observer to tell whether they breathed audibly, and were not the gay-hued butterflies, the long-armed spiders, and the quivering beetles they seemed.

The flowers of every torrid region met and grew in that sunny room, and the air was almost heavy with their sweet exhalations.

There were several fountains, and in their marble basins flourished those plants which love the water, and their green leaves and white and pink blossoms floated idly on the clear surface, while other vines sent creeping tendrils over the sides, enclosing the basins in a green and living wreath, bedecked with flowers.

In one corner of this pleasant chamber, in a pretty nook formed by a group of orange-trees, Hellice found refuge.

The fragrance of the flowers soothed her into a delicious reverie, as sweet as a hashish-heater's dream, and she forgot her fears and sorrows and revelled in pleasant, vague imaginings.

Thus absorbed, she did not hear the sound of hoofs on the gravelled avenue, the sign of Sir Richard Haughton's coming with his uncle, nor did she heed afterwards the sound of steps in the drawing-room, nor their approach to her refuge.

She was aroused only when the young Baronet entered her presence, and espied her in the nook, his eye caught by the gleaming of her scarlet shawl from out a cloud of orange blossoms.

"All alone, Miss Glintwick?" he asked, after exchanging greetings with her. "The servant ushered me as usual into the drawing-room, but Lady Redwoode and Miss Avon are engaged elsewhere. May I join you?"

Reading permission in her eyes, he approached her nook, taking possession of a chair at its entrance, and playfully informing her that he held her prisoner.

"Is Mr. Haughton with you?" inquired Hellice.

"He accompanied me, but has gone to look for you in the garden. He will probably find his way in soon by the conservatory door," and Sir Richard indicated a door at the end of the apartment, which entered upon the flower-gardens, and which had been opened to relieve the oppressiveness of the perfume-laden air within. "You have doubtless discovered, Miss Glintwick, that my uncle is your earnest admirer. He thinks only of you, talks only of you, and dreams only of you."

Hellice smiled and blushed, pleased with this tribute of affection from even poor Mr. Haughton, whose idiosyncrasies had become familiar to her, and whom she respected and liked.

"Mr. Haughton has contributed a great deal to making my stay at Redwoode pleasant," she said, half sadly. "I shall often think of him, his gentle ways and his kind heart, and I hope he will not soon forget me."

"Forget you!" exclaimed Sir Richard, in surprise. "You speak as though you were not to see him every day, Miss Glintwick."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Richard. I forgot that no one knew my plans but myself. I have not yet told my aunt or cousin of my intentions, but I expect to leave Redwoode immediately. I should allow you to learn my resolve from Lady Redwoode, but that it is due to you after your neighbourly kindness to me to bid you good-bye in person."

Hellice spoke calmly, but her clear eyes

beamed with a sad light that touched the Baronet, to the innermost depths of his being.

"Is not this a sudden resolve?" he asked, puzzled and startled by her communication. "Are you going to join other relatives, Miss Glintwick?"

"Pardon me, Sir Richard," responded the East Indian, "but I cannot answer your very natural questions. I can only say that I believe myself to be following the dictates of duty in leaving Redwoode. I am not yet decided as to my future movements, but I shall probably never return to this place."

Sir Richard's fine face grew pale and his blue eyes assumed a startled expression. He had too much delicacy to question the young girl farther, or to seek to discover her reasons for what seemed to him a very singular step. But that she had good reasons he was convinced.

One glance at her calm, resolute truthful countenance sufficed to convince him that she was not about to act upon an ill-advised rashness, but that she would be guided by prudence and discretion. He said to himself that, whatever the cause of her hasty departure, it could involve no blame upon her part.

He absolved Lady Redwoode equally from all blame. But it was Cecile whom he instinctively distrusted—Cecile, whose blonde beauty was insipid in his eyes, of whose character he had some faint suspicions, and of whose sentiments towards Hellice he had become aware by observing one or two petty displays of tyranny which had aroused his indignation and excited his chivalrous instincts.

He decided in his own mind that Hellice's proud spirit could no longer brook such treatment, and that she was going away where she could live in peace and quiet.

His love for her had increased in force and intensity. Already a score of times he had been upon the point of declaring his love for her, but the recollection that their acquaintance was so brief had each time deterred him.

He had, however, communicated his hopes and desires to Lady Redwoode, who had, believing Hellice to be what Cecile had declared her to be, declined to further his suit, but left him free to address the maiden whenever he chose upon the subject nearest his heart. He had not meant to be precipitate.

He had resolved to woo her long and gently, as he would lure some rare and timid bird to his arms. He realised her exquisite delicacy, and feared to wound it by unseemly haste.

But he could not suffer her to go away, unknowing his love, and unconscious that her absence would be a heavy blow to him. No; he must tell her, and at once.

This resolution received new strength when he looked into her mournful face, and saw sad thoughts were busy at her heart.

"Hellice," he said, gently, as if he feared to frighten her by the sound of his voice, "Hellice, I have something to tell you. We have known each other but a brief time if we count the days of our acquaintance; but there are some natures so in sympathy with each other that a single meeting, oftentimes a single look, is sufficient to knit them together in an enduring love. I am a grave, reserved man, Hellice, and I know not how to say what I wish without perhaps startling you. I have thought that our souls, yours and mine, were so akin to each other that only an electric spark was needed to weld them into one. That spark flashed from your eyes into mine the day you looked in upon me as I lay on the ground by the waterfall. Hellice—"

He paused, for the East Indian girl was looking at him half frightened and shy. A host of snowy petals had detached themselves from the orange branches above her and had showered themselves in a snowy, perfumed drift upon her dusky hair, over her dress, and upon the scarlet of her shawl.

Her hands were clasped together in her lap, and her slender, swaying figure had assumed a half-drooping attitude.

The sight of that wondering, frightened face banished all connected thought from the mind

of the young Baronet. One yearning alone possessed him—to fold her in his arms and beg her to become his wife. One fear beset him—that she would reject him.

Could it be that for him, whose life had been blighted once, there was reserved so great a happiness as Hellice's love?

He leaned forward, intending to tell her gently and gradually of his hopes and fears, but his great love for her shone in his eyes, irradiated his noble face, and quivered in his accents.

"Hellice," he began, then paused again, unable to complete the sentence he had contemplated. "Hellice," he said again, and then the passion flooding his soul gained possession of his tongue, and found rightful utterance.

It was no courtly speech he said, no high-flown rhapsody, only the earnest, truthful, passionate cry,—

"Hellice, darling, I love you!"

The young girl flashed a rapid, startled look at him, then her clear, sweet eyes drooped shyly, and a lovely flush crept into the cheeks that a moment before had been as pale as the orange-flower petals nestling among the ripples of her hair.

Her hands trembled on her knees, and her lips quivered under the strange emotion filling her heart with quick pulsations.

That cry of the young Baronet had evoked an answering love in her soul. The sweet lesson learned by every young and generous heart was unfolding itself to her—the sweet old lesson of love.

"Speak to me, Hellice!" cried Sir Richard, with the impatience of an ardent young lover who dreads to hear a condemnatory sentence, and yet who would have the worst of it. "Am I presumptuous? Have I spoken too soon? My darling, my life, my love!"

He stole one arm around her slender waist, and she did not repulse him. With infinite tenderness he drew her little head to his bosom, and she did not withdraw it. The orange branches showered down upon both a rain of snowy, perfumed leaves like a benison, the waves of fragrant air passed over them unheeded, the fountains tinkled their merry music unheard, for those young hearts were throbbing to a sweeter, tenderer music—the fragrance of an undying love pervaded their souls.

At length, with exquisite gentleness, Sir Richard bent over the maiden, gazed into her shining, happy eyes, and pressed upon her lips in silence the holy kiss of betrothal. It was not returned, but the young lover knew that Hellice's heart was all his own, and that she had given her tacit but solemn promise to become his wife.

"My beautiful, my own!" he whispered, with a lover's rapture.

At the sound of these words a heavy sigh, that seemed wrung from a human heart—a woman's sobbing sigh—floated to their ears. Both looked up startled, but no one was within sight. Apparently they were quite alone.

"What was that?" whispered Hellice.

"The breeze among the flowers, my darling!" answered Sir Richard.

Yet, strangely enough, Hellice thought of the pretended gipsy's prophecy, and Sir Richard's thoughts reverted to the threats of his vindictive enemy—his divorced wife.

## CHAPTER XV.

The momentary shadow that had obscured the faces and hearts of the young lovers at the sound of that anguished sigh and the memories it evoked passed as swiftly as it had come before the sunshine of their love. Sir Richard Haughton bent again over the maiden, his breath caressing her rippling waves of perfumed hair, and his honest blue eyes beaming with a mighty and unutterable love such as had never before possessed his soul. And Hellice, shy and modest, with drooping head and scarlet cheek, half nestled

beside him, wondering at the great flood of happiness that had so suddenly illumined her lonely life, transforming it into an Elysium.

"I never dreamed of joy like this!" said the young Baronet. "This moment more than recompenses me for all my past lonely, sorrowful years. Sea View will become a Paradise when you walk within its walls, Hellice. I had thought that woman's voice and woman's laughter would never be heard there again, but your presence will yet, I trust, make the sweetest sunshine and music in my home."

He spoke ardently and with enthusiasm. Whatever he felt, he felt strongly. He possessed one of those strong, domestic natures peculiar to those of English race; but home to him could not be home unless it enshrined a dear and loving presence. His life had been so long desolated by the treachery of his divorced wife that he could hardly comprehend his present joy, and he welcomed it as the storm-tossed and shipwrecked wanderer welcomes the clear-shining beacon that points out a safe and peaceful harbour. So Sir Richard, with no prophetic voice warning him of the future, fancied he had reached a secure haven at last.

"You speak as though you had never loved before, Richard," said Hellice, shyly, half frightened at the sound of her own sweet voice freighted with feeling. "Am I your first love?"

The young Baronet was struck with dismay at this question. A temptation seized him to confide the story of his life to Hellice, to lay bare before her the history of his early infatuation for Margaret Sorel, his marriage with her, and their early subsequent divorce. He knew now that he had never loved the handsome actress, that his fancy for her had been but fleeting; and even had she been worthy of his affection, his life could not have been otherwise than barren and desolate with her. He knew that Hellice, as his betrothed wife, had a right to his confidence, and yet he shrank from telling her. How could he pour into her pure ears the tale of Margaret Sorel's baseness and wickedness? How could he shock her with a recital of such unwomanliness as must puzzle her innocent soul to comprehend? He decided that he could not tell her now, but when she had become his wife, and no possible shadow could arise between them, he would confide to her the story of his early marriage. He had no fears that gossiping visitors would reveal it, for his affairs had been kept tolerably secret, the tragic events of his life having transpired at a considerable distance from his home. Lady Redwoode was familiar with his history, but he had no doubts of her discretion or of that of the various members of her family.

He unwisely resolved, therefore, to defer his confidence for the present. Had some kind providence but even slightly lifted the veil of the future, he would have hastened to lay bare his life before his betrothed, and rested not until she had become familiar with its details. But not even a prophetic sadness warned him when he made his decision.

Gathering the maiden closer to him, and speaking with a truthful solemnity, made more effective by the slight pause that had preceded it, he said:—

"You are my first, last, and only love. Before I knew you I never even imagined what it was to love. You are the first to arouse the deeper and holier emotions of my nature, and when I cease to adore you my soul will cease to exist."

A bright, glad smile lighted up the face of Hellice, and at the same moment that long-drawn, sobbing sigh was heard again throughout the room. Then followed a sound like the rustling of a robe against the leaves of low-lying plants and shrubs; then a shadow flitted across the open doorway, and the perfume-laden breeze cast back to their ears a low, anguished cry that seemed wrung from the human heart in despair.

The lovers looked up quickly, but their glances assured them that they were alone.

"There must have been someone in here," said Hellice, wonderingly.

Sir Richard's heart echoed her words, and foreboded the name of the unhappy listener. Could Margaret Sorel have gained access to the conservatory from the garden, and had she heard the avowal of his love for Hellice? Tortured by the thought, he sprang up, traversed the length of the room quickly, and looked out at the open door. There was no trace of the hidden listener without, but Mr. Haughton was coming up the garden, fanning himself with his hat, and pausing now and then to look behind him with an exceedingly puzzled stare.

The young Baronet turned to retrace his steps to Hellice. He had made but two or three paces towards her, when his troubled gaze fell upon a bit of cambric gleaming like snow under the shade of a heavy-blossoming oleander tree. He sprang towards it and picked it up, shaking from it as he did so a sickly perfume, which he recognised as the favourite odour of Margaret Sorel. It was not necessary that he should catch sight of the daintily-embroidered initials in the corner to assure himself that the handkerchief belonged to her. He flung it from him as though it had been a deadly serpent, and with ill-concealed agitation approached Hellice.

"It is nothing, my darling!" he said, tenderly, bending his face over the clustering orange-blossoms that continued to drift their fragrant petals upon the maiden's head, that she might not notice the deadly paleness that he felt creeping over his features. "I saw no one but my uncle in the garden."

He appeared to be inhaling the exquisite fragrance of the flowers, and Hellice, absorbed in sweet reveries, did not notice his anxious manner. He felt certain that his divorced wife had been present throughout his interview with Hellice, and that she would prove herself a bitter enemy to him and his betrothed. With a sudden feeling of danger, he resolved no longer to delay the communication of his early marriage.

"Hellice," he began, suddenly, and then paused, with a sinking heart, for his uncle had appeared at the threshold of the conservatory, and was about to enter their presence.

His opportunity had passed for the present, and he recognised the fact with a troubled foreboding.

The young girl looked up at the sound of her name, and at the same moment Mr. Haughton approached the young couple, his countenance wearing a look of abstraction, and his eyes beaming with benevolent interest upon them.

"Good morning, Miss Glintwick!" he said, with a very deep bow and a courteous wave of the hand. "I hope I see you well. I find you in your rightful home among the flowers, and not less fair than they. The bright exotic of India seems to flourish on English soil."

Hellice blushed rosily, and murmured her thanks for the compliment.

"A compliment was never better deserved, as Sir Richard can bear witness," replied Mr. Haughton, looking from one to the other of the young pair. "You look different from usual, Dick. What can be the matter? Have you young people quarrelled?"

"Not so, uncle," said the young Baronet, stealing an arm around the slender, upright figure of Hellice. "You must forgive me for forestalling you," and he smiled, "but I have asked Miss Glintwick to become my wife, and she has kindly consented to have pity upon me."

Mr. Haughton appeared astonished, and even overcome at this revelation. He caught hold of a small geranium for support, but his grasp was so vigorous as to uproot it. He then leaned against an orange-tree, bending it under his weight, and turned a glance full of sorrow and reproach upon his recreant nephew.

"Richard," he exclaimed, in tones of grief, "you knew I intended to marry Hellice myself!"

"But she preferred me, uncle."

"Is that so? Then it alters the case," said Mr. Haughton, resignedly. "Perhaps it is better so. I must remain wedded in science. Posterity would have a right to reproach me if I deserted the cause of science even for love. Hellice will live at Sea View, and I shall see her every day just the same. My blessings on your choice, Richard," and his manner became grandiloquent and paternal. "Hellice, I trust you will be as happy as you deserve."

He offered his hand, and imprinted a kiss upon Hellice's cheek as a token of his perfect resignation in her choice. Thoughts of his flying-machine, which for a week had been quite forgotten, came to console him for his disappointment, and he came almost cheerful in view of his anticipated mechanical triumphs.

"Be happy, both of you," he enjoined them, with a display of paternal affection. "Let no pity for me mar your happiness. And, speaking of happiness, it reminds me of that gipsy we met one day last week. I saw her steal out of the conservatory a few minutes ago, and make for the wood. I hope she has no more of her pleasant little prophecies for you! Did she say you would marry and be happy, and that I would attain to a towering position in the world of fame?"

"The—the gipsy was here, then?" exclaimed the Baronet.

"Do you doubt your senses, Richard?" inquired his surprised relative.

"We did not see her, Mr. Haughton," said Hellice, unpleasantly impressed by the fact of the pretended gipsy's recent proximity.

Mr. Haughton expressed his astonishment at this assertion, and soon after, hearing voices in the drawing-room, proceeded thither. Sir Richard lingered behind him only long enough to solicit permission of his betrothed to confide their engagement to Lady Redwoode, and then sought her at once—leaving Hellice alone, as the maiden desired.

She did not linger in the conservatory, where the flowers and fountains had been made witnesses of her sweet embarrassments and of her lover's tender caresses. She feared that Lady Redwoode would seek her there, and she did not wish to meet even the Baroness then. Acting upon a sudden impulse, she glided out into the garden, and sought the shade of the wood, that she might undisturbedly commune with her heart.

(To be continued next week.)

(This story commenced in No 2013. Back numbers can be obtained through any News-agent.)

#### LONGINGS.

Oh, for a shade from the noonday heat!  
Oh, for a rest from pain!  
A strong right arm,  
And a tender balm  
That will fall on my heart like rain.

Oh, for a lasting, truthful love!  
Oh, for a real friend!  
An aim in life,  
And a spirit rife  
With hope for the promised end.

Oh, for a conscience white and clear!  
Oh, for a temper mild!  
A trusting heart  
That will joy impart,  
And love like a little child.

Oh, for a prayer to pierce the skies!  
Oh, for a joyous song!  
A purpose true  
To dare and do,  
And judge 'twixt the right and wrong.

Oh, for a pardon for all my sins!  
Oh, for sweet mercy given!  
For grace and peace  
Till life shall cease;  
And oh, for a seat in heaven!



## HESTER'S SECRET.

(NOVELETTE.)

(Continued from page 347.)

"Accordingly the marriage took place, and it was not until some time afterwards that Hester knew of your existence, for Miss Sandford had been away in London for six months, and Mr. Seagrave never once mentioned your name.

"I don't think Hester was very unhappy. Her husband was to her simply an indulgent father, to whom she played, read, and generally devoted herself.

"Then, by some means, she learned of your claim to the estates, and from the very first her sympathy was with you; and she lost no opportunity of persuading Mr. Seagrave to restore the estates to you at his death.

"I confess I did not second her efforts, for I was quite satisfied with the will he had already made, by which my daughter had inherited everything.

"However, the old gentleman became very ill, and Hester nursed him with tenderest care and devotion; but she never let slip a chance of advocating her favourite project, and finally he gave way, and three days before his death executed a will by which all the landed property went to you, while to his wife was left an income of four hundred a year.

"I frankly acknowledge that I was extremely angry, but neither tears nor entreaties had any effect on Hester, and I saw the grand fabric of wealth and importance, which I had counted on for my daughter's future, crumbling away to a paltry four hundred a year.

"The night before he died, Mr. Seagrave sank into a state of coma, from which the doctor told me there was no chance of his rallying. The hospital nurse sat up with him until two o'clock, and then Hester took her place. A quarter of an hour later I went into the room, and was shocked at Hester's pallor. I could see she was physically worn out with her vigils, so I put on her dressing-gown and sent her off to bed, telling her I myself would watch beside the sick man.

"I did not let her suspect the end was so near, otherwise I should not have been able to induce her to leave her husband; but when she had gone, and I found myself alone, a terrible temptation overtook me.

"In the bedroom, on the right side of the fireplace, and opposite the door, was an old bureau, and in this bureau were Mr. Seagrave's two wills, for he would not let the first be destroyed, in case, as he said, he should change his mind regarding Alec Wharton's heirship.

"The key of the bureau was under the pillow of the sick man. I took it, opened the bureau, and saw before me the two wills—two folded pieces of blue paper, that seemed to mock me with their likeness to each other.

"Then, I suppose, 'the Devil tempted me,' as he tempted my mother Eve before me; and after reading the last will through I tossed it into the fire, and watched it until it was a little blackened piece of ashes.

"As I turned round some magnetism drew my eyes to a small pane of glass set in the wall above the door, which, in order that I might not be surprised, I had taken the precaution of locking, and there I saw a white face, and two mocking eyes watching me. They belonged to Edith Sandford.

"After the first shock of surprise I ceased to feel any fear of betrayal, for I thought I had gauged Miss Sandford's character, and I knew I could buy her silence. I had no difficulty in coming to an arrangement with her; but I did not take into consideration one thing, which was stronger even than her avarice—the vindictive spite of a jealous woman.

"Yes, I think Miss Sandford has proved herself cleverer even than I thought her, and, judged by the light of later events, her conduct has ceased to puzzle me.

"At the time of Mr. Seagrave's death she bore some sort of grudge against you, Colonel

Wharton, and she was not sorry to have an opportunity of paying it by helping to cheat you of your inheritance; but if, by any chance, she had afterwards had even the slightest prospect of becoming your wife, she would instantly have confessed the truth about the wills.

"As matters turned out there was no such prospect. On the contrary, she saw Hester, whom she had always hated, on the point of becoming engaged to you, and with a most diabolical malice she traded on her knowledge of my secret, and her conviction that Hester would never betray me, to separate you two.

"Mind, Hester at that time did not know the truth, but she half suspected it, for she could not understand how Mr. Seagrave himself could have destroyed the will, seeing that he was too weak and powerless, after signing it, to leave his bed.

"Surely I have expiated my sin by the agony of seeing the distrust in my daughter's eyes as they rested on me—the shrinking from my caresses, when my love for her burst through the barriers of self-control with which I have tried to fence it in!

"But of that I need not speak. My purpose in writing to you is not to extenuate my own conduct, but to clear Hester—the sweetest, purest creature on all Heaven's wide earth!

"As you know, the first will was acted upon, and I took possession of the estates as trustee and sole executrix until Hester should come of age; but she declared then—and she has never swerved from the determination—that on her twenty-first birthday she would restore to you all the property that James Seagrave inherited from your family. Until that time she must, outwardly at least, acquiesce in the provisions of the will.

"Not until to-day have I known the meaning of her altered looks and failing health, but by sheer chance I learned this morning that she and you had been engaged to each other, and that Edith Sandford came between you—the rest I guessed.

"Now you know that she has borne the burden of a false accusation for the sake of shielding the guilt of the true culprit—her unhappy mother.

"EMILIE MAINWARING."

The immediate result of this epistle was the appearance of Alec at Beechwood some five hours after he received it. He found Hester in the morning-room—such a pale, fragile Hester, who sprang up as he entered, eyes and cheeks and lips changing as a snow peak changes under the sunset sky!

A minute later she was in his arms, her heart beating out a wild rapture of welcome against his, while his kisses covered her lips and hair. And in the sweetness of that caress both felt the bitter past fully redeemed!

Alec wished to be married at once, but Beryl entreated so earnestly that Hester would wait until the spring time, when her own wedding would take place, that her sister consented.

Of course, there was no question of Charlie Muir leaving England now, but he stayed in London long enough to see his brother off to Australia; and some time afterwards there came a very penitent letter from Edward, confessing that it was, indeed, he who had relieved his uncle of the hundred and fifty pounds on the memorable night of the twenty-fourth of July.

And so in the spring time, when the violets were making the lanes about Beechwood sweet with their dainty fragrance, Mrs. Mainwaring watched both her daughters kneeling at the altar—and surely two fairer brides never plighted their troth together!

And yet the mother turned away with a cruel pain at her heart. She saw both Hester and Beryl married to wealthy men—and this had been the end which for many years she had striven hard to attain. But in the triumph of fruition there was the bitterness of an eternal regret. The trail of the serpent lay over the wedding flowers, and even though

she had made some sort of reparation for her crimes, she could not drive away the Nemesis of shame that follows in the footsteps of sin.

The happy mist of tears prevented Hester from seeing this—or, indeed, from seeing anything save the tender eyes of her husband shining down into hers. For those two—

Love took up the harp of life, smote on all the chords with might,  
Smote the chord of self, that, trembling, passed  
in music out of sight!

[THE END.]

## LAMP SHADES.

A very elaborate lamp-shade, but one that repays for the trouble, is made of rows and rows of paper, each row ending with long and narrow strips, ribbed up the centre and crinkled. The colours employed are shades of yellow to orange, shades of white to pink, shades of pink to deep red. The darkest shade is laid at the top of the lamp, the lightest at the bottom, and much of the effect is gained by a judicious choice of the various shades so that they blend into each other. To make this lamp-shade, first cover the wire frame, then cut a strip of tissue-paper of the lightest shade and make it the full length to go round the outside of the frame. It must be six inches in width. Of this width leave the top two inches plain and cut the lower four inches into a number of strips two inches wide. Take a good-sized steel knitting-needle, push one end into a wine cork to make a handle, then warm it well over a spirit lamp, and press one of the strips of paper on to the knitting-needle, so that a well-marked rib runs down its centre, crinkle the sides with the hands, then pick up the next strip, and make its rib and its crinkled sides. When finished, paste the plain part of the paper on to the frame and allow the strips to fall down below. Cut a second strip of paper of the same size but in another shade, prepare it in the same way, and paste it on the frame an inch higher than the first one. Cut the next two strips only five inches in length, the next two four inches, and so on, until the top of the shade is reached, and the last strip has only a quarter of an inch foundation and a crinkled part two inches in depth. Finish the upright part of the frame with a thick paper ruche.

## A FAMILY MATTER.

She sewed a button on my coat,  
I watched the fingers nimble;  
Sometimes I held her spool of thread,  
And sometimes held her thimble,  
"I'm glad to do it, since you're far  
From sister and from mother.  
"Tis such a thing," she said, and smiled,  
"As I'd do for my brother."  
The fair head bent so closely to me  
My heart was wildly beating;  
She seemed to feel my gaze, looked up,  
And then, our glances meeting,  
She flushed a ruddy, rosy red,  
And I, I bent and kissed her.  
"Tis such a thing," I murmured low,  
"As I'd do to my sister."

Dean Farrar  
on Marriage

A charming article on this subject forms a delightful introduction to a handbook, entitled "Marriage, Weddings, and the Home," which is absolutely invaluable to all who are contemplating matrimony. This book will prove a very acceptable present to all engaged couples. A Purchaser at Nottingham says: "From a very cursory inspection I should imagine it to be a most useful book." It explains every point in regard to etiquette, offers suggestions as to where to spend the honeymoon, there is a chapter in regard to furnishing, etc., and the 1/6 which it costs is a marvellously good investment. Send Stamps or Postal Order to-day to F. W. SEARS, 7, OSBORNE CHAMBERS, LUDGATE HILL, LONDON.

## Gleanings

A **SHREWD** observer has learned that old maids love to kiss and fondle cats because they have whiskers.

It has been discovered that four women walking abreast on the pavement can be scattered a little by an active man with a paint pot.

Of all money transactions in this country, 97 per cent. are transacted by cheque; only 3 per cent. by notes or gold.

The oldest inhabited house in England is on the River Ver, close to St. Albans Abbey. It is octagonal in shape, and supposed to be eleven centuries old.

The steeple of Chesterfield Church is more pronouncedly crooked than any other in the country. It is the nearest rival in the United Kingdom to the leaning tower at Pisa.

**GREAT TUNNELS.**—The Mont Cenis is 7½ miles long, cost £2,600,000, and took thirteen years to make. The Saint Gothard, though two miles longer, took four years less to make, and cost £330,000 less. The Arlberg was still more speedily and cheaply finished. The length is 6½ miles, the cost was £1,400,000, and the work was finished in four years.

The **SIMPLON TUNNEL**, which is nearing completion, is to cost £2,800,000. The length will be 12½ miles, and the great difficulty of construction lies in the high temperature—104 degrees Fahrenheit—encountered in the deepest part of the route. This obstacle is met by pumping in glacier water and spraying it, with the result that the temperature can always be kept below 90 degrees Fahrenheit. The rate of progress has ranged from 16ft. to 22ft. per day.

The phrase ping-pong, which one is getting to hear every day, is by no means new. In Chambers's "Traditions of Edinburgh," 1825, in an account of the old Scotch ladies' costume is this passage:—"A ping-pong—a jewel fixed to a wire with a long pin at the end, worn in front of the cap, and which shook as the wearer moved. It was generally stuck in the cushion, over which the hair was turned in front. Several were frequently worn at once. It was sometimes pronounced pom-poon." Anyone who has been struck in the eye by a ping-pong ball will see the force of calling it sometimes a pom-pom.

THE **NEXT GREAT TUNNEL**.—The *Traveller* gives particulars of the next great tunnel that will be built. The line on which it will occur is to be the direct route from Upper Austria to Trieste, and it will pierce the Corinthian Alps, in which is the famous Gron Glocker. Though the whole length of the line is only to be 192 miles, the money voted for it is no less than £7,000,000. There will be two big tunnels, one about five and a third and the other about five miles long. As water-power is everywhere plentiful, it was at first intended to run the trains by electricity, but the decision was finally given in favour of steam. The maximum gradient will be one in forty, which is the highest for this class of railway.

"**WEAR A GOOD HAT.**"—When the American humorist advised the world to—

Wear a good hat. The secret of your looks  
Rests with the beaver in Canadian brooks,  
he was alluding to men rather than women. But, according to a writer in a contemporary, it applies with equal force to the women of this country:—"It is somewhat surprising," we are told, "considering that Englishwomen bear away the palm for loveliness, that in the country they make such frights of themselves. I have come to the conclusion that the fault lies chiefly in the headgear they wear, for naturally it is the hat which frames the face that is most *en évidence*. We cannot expect the sportswoman to clothe herself in flowing skirts or fascinating high heels, neither do we wish her to wear a tulle and befeathered hat which would be spoiled by one country mist or

shower of rain; but I opine that absolute hideousness is not necessary for useful headgear, and it is only the Englishwoman who has introduced it."

WHAT is the difference between a belle and a burglar? The belle carries false locks and the burglar carries false keys.

THE orange tree is very fruitful, and a single tree will produce 20,000 oranges fit for use. A good lemon tree will produce 8,000 lemons.

**BACHELORS** were taxed in England from 1695 to 1706. The tax was a graduated one from 1s. a year for a common person up to £2 10s. for a duke.

**GROWING ENGLAND.**—We are all familiar enough with the submerged parish in Lincolnshire on which tithes are still paid, and the legend that on certain nights the old church may still be seen underneath the waves and the ghostly bells heard tolling. Not so much attention is paid to the land yielded back by the sea. Dungeness Point, however, is an example of land continually growing seaward. It has caused a new lighthouse to be needed there, and the contract to do so for £6,000 has actually been signed by a Deal firm. It will be the third lighthouse erected upon Dungeness Point. The first, built about sixty years ago, is now close on a mile inland, and the second is quite half a mile from the seashore.

**JAPANESE WOMEN.**—It appears that the Japanese woman is becoming Westernised. Her chief vice seems to be that, instead of holding herself erect, she perpetually stoops forward. A Japanese woman who walks upright is accused of "putting on side." For the rest, Japanese women are taking to painting and letters; many make a living by instructing pupils in the art of arranging flowers and preparing tea; still others are employed in offices, private and public. Many clerks in the telephone and post-offices are women, and it is asserted that as bookkeepers they are unsurpassed. But that there is still some leeway to be made up may be guessed from the fact that only one Japanese woman can be pointed to as "a talented novelist."

**FASHIONS A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.**—The French ladies are represented to us as more undressed than our own fashionables, which is hard of belief. They have had the costume à la Grecque, à la Sauvage, and a hundred others. But their generals have not imported the Coptic or the Arabesque. What the dress of a modern Arabian coquette may be we profess our ignorance; but the Republican fair ones will not adopt it if it resembles what Tertullian describes it to have been in his time. "The Arabian women, says the father, cover the entire of their face, excepting one of the eyes, preferring to be deprived on one-half of the daylight rather than prostitute the whole countenance." This is literally translated.—From the *Times* of Wednesday, November 25, 1801.

THE **EARTH'S CURVATURE.**—Although it was demonstrated more than 2,000 years ago that the earth, upon which our lives are passed, is globular in form, there are certain persons who maintain that it is flat. About thirty years ago controversy on this subject waxed so hot that it was determined to put the matter to direct experiment in order to settle the question once for all. The place chosen was near Bedford, where there is a straight six-mile stretch of water. At both ends and in the middle of this water posts were erected, each of the same definite height, above the water-level. Upon looking with a telescope along the tops of these three posts, it was clearly seen that the centre one overtopped the others by about six feet, owing to the curvature of the surface of the earth. These experiments were repeated only last year by Mr. H. Yule Oldham, and the same results were obtained, with the important difference that by the employment of a tele-photographic lens and camera the six-foot prominence of the middle post was recorded in an unmistakable manner.

## Facetiæ

**LITTLE GIRL:** "Please, mum, pa's got a chill, an' he wants to know if he can come over and shake yer carpets."

**GRAVES** (loftily): "I believe in honour where honour is due." Merriman: "Well, then, suppose you honour this note, which is due."

"I **REACH** and reach, but cannot grasp," writes a poet. Well, people should not put a porous plaster between their shoulder blades unless they can rely on someone to take it off.

**WIFE** (innocently): "Is the hunting season over?" Husband (petulantly): "Of course. Look at the weather. Any fool ought to know that." Wife (sweetly): "That's why I asked you, my dear."

**HAPPY ALL ROUND.**—Husband: "If you only had the ability to cook as mother used to, I would be happy, dear." Wife: "And if you only had the ability to make money enough to buy things to cook, as your father used to, I, too, would be happy, dear."

**KNEW HE'D HAVE 'EM.**—"What's your dad a-doin' now?" asked a farmer of a boy. "Pa isn't doing anything," replied the boy. "Well how does he make a livin'?" "Oh, he has a sinecure." "He hez, hez he? I tole him he'd have 'em if he didn't stop drinkin'."

**GREAT LUCK.**—"What luck did you have, dear?" asked his wife, as he returned home from a day's fishing. "Splendid," he said; "just look at them." Opening his basket, he displayed a lot of sausages. The man he bought 'em of had mixed those baskets up.

ONE of her friends, not very well off in a worldly way, had bought her a simple but pretty gift on her birthday. "It's only a trifle," the friend began, when Mrs. Volatile interrupted her with, "Oh, no apologies, I beg. I shall value it just as much as the presents I have received which are really worth something."

**WHAT HE WANTED.**—"Papa," she said, softly and blushing, "young Mr. Sampson is in the parlour, and wishes to speak with you." Then she sank into an easy chair, and her heart beat so fiercely that it made the gas-fixtures rattle. Presently the old man returned. "Oh, papa!" she said, "did he—was he—what did he want?" "He wanted to borrow a shilling to get home with," said the disappointed old gentleman.

It was a little newly-arrived sister that nurse held in her arms, and seven-year-old Robbie stood jealously inspecting her. To his mind she looked smaller and less attractive than any little sister of the other boys that he could remember, and he felt a keen thrill of disappointment. So he put his hands deep into his pockets like papa, wrinkled up his nose, and, regarding the new acquisition savagely, said, "Well, I call that pretty near a failure!"

**WIFE:** "What do you think of that hat Miss Fussanfeather wore to church this morning?" Husband: "I didn't notice Miss Fussanfeather's hat." "It's very funny you didn't see it. She sat directly in front of you." "Well, suppose she did. Do you suppose I go to church to look at women's hats?" "Well, my dear, it's the same hat Miss Fussanfeather wore at the theatre last night, and which you claim obstructed your view of the stage." Husband concludes that he has been caught napping.

**JOHNNY:** "Ma, may I take the perambulator? I want to play with it for a little while." Mother: "Well, Johnny, I should think you might ask to take baby too; you know that the new nurse has not arrived yet. I am afraid you don't love your little brother very much, Johnny." Johnny: "Oh, yes, I do, ma; he shall come, too; he'll make a splendid fireman. Billy Gubbins has his mother's clothes-line, the perambulator will be the fire-engine, and there'll be about twenty boys to pull. We'll make things right."



## Society

A GRACEFUL compliment, it is reported, is to be paid to Queen Alexandra by the King at the Coronation in the institution of a new Order for ladies with which her name will be associated. As far back as the seventeenth century female Orders of distinction were established. In 1652 an Order for ladies was founded by the Duke of Württemberg, with the curious name of "The Order of Death's Head," the badge being a white enamelled Death's Head with jewelled cross. The Empress Eleonora of Austria founded "The Ladies' Order of the Cross," and in 1652 instituted another having the peculiar title "The Order of Ladies, Slaves to Virtue," with a golden sun as badge, encircled with laurel. In 1708, the Empress Elizabeth originated "The Order of Neighbourly Love," with golden cross for badge. In the nineteenth century Orders for Ladies were instituted in Prussia, Portugal, Russia, and Spain.

The German Crown Prince's health shows no sign of improvement. He has, therefore, been obliged to give up all visits, including many shooting parties.

It is now stated that the reports that are going about in regard to a supposed misunderstanding between Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands and Prince Hendrik seem to be based upon the fact, or accusation, that the Prince devotes all his time to sport, to the exclusion of other duties. He is not popular with the Queen's subjects, and he takes no particular pains to ingratiate himself with them. All the same, the reports that have appeared in the papers are grossly exaggerated.

The marriage of the Archduchess Elizabeth, only child of the late Crown Prince Rudolph, and granddaughter of the King of the Belgians, and Prince Otto Windisch-Gratz is to take place at Vienna in the Chapel of St. Joseph on Monday, January 27.

A CURIOUS story comes from Windsor Castle. When the Prince Consort died a bust was made with the assistance of a cast taken from his face. This up to the last occupied a place in the private apartments of Queen Victoria. At the same time Her Majesty had a bust made of herself, desiring to perpetuate the personal appearance of husband and wife at the time of their separation. This latter disappeared from view, and there was a long-lived tradition in the domestic circle at Windsor that by direction of the Queen it had been hidden away. Inquiries made of one of the old servants on the domestic staff at the time of the death of the Prince Consort confirmed the story. He was able to point to a place where the bust was walled in. Bricks and mortar removed, the bust was rescued, and the Queen and Prince Consort as they were forty years ago are once more side by side in marble presentment.

BUCKINGHAM PALACE, though still wearing the same severe exterior, is undergoing a complete transformation inside, as we have pointed out in this column before. It will not, however be ready so early as the King had expected. His Majesty had hoped to take up residence there in February, but, owing to several unavoidable delays in completing some of the structural alterations, it is probable that it will not be occupied until after the Easter holidays.

THERE was a click of the latch-key in the front door about 12.30 a.m., and Mr. Job Shuttle stole softly upstairs. His spouse had not yet begun to dream dreams, but was awaiting him. "Seems to me you are later than usual." "Yes, a little, my dear," said Job. "You see, I was elected K. of S. to-night." "K. of S. What's that?" "Why, keeper of the seal, of course." "Indeed! And about how long before I'm to be elected keeper of a sealskin jacket?" "A woman knows just when to pour on cold water."

## Amazing Bile Bean Cure.

A MAN WHO COULD DIGEST NOTHING!

DOCTOR SAID HE WOULD HAVE TO BE  
A VEGETARIAN!

TO-DAY HE CAN ENJOY ROAST BEEF!

From all quarters of England are coming reports which illustrate the amazing curative powers of the great vegetable medicine, Charles Forde's Bile Beans for Biliousness. One such report from Malpas, in Cheshire, deserves special attention. Mr. Samuel Hewitt, of Walk Cottages, Malpas is the subject, and the facts of the case were told by him to a Cheshire reporter. He said:—

"For many years I suffered agonies from indigestion, biliousness, and headache; and I tried all kinds of so-called remedies without receiving any benefit. Fourteen years ago I had a sharp attack of rheumatic fever, and another one over four years ago. This latter illness left me in a very weak state. My digestion was so impaired that I seemed as if I could digest nothing. Day after day I felt so weak and low spirited that I had to give up all



thought of working. During five or six years this sort of thing was going on. I consulted no fewer than four doctors, who prescribed for me, although in the end they said they could not do anything more for me.

One of them told me that I should have to give up eating meat altogether and become a vegetarian. Not a week passed without my complaint asserting itself. One day an uncle from Manchester told my mother about the wonderful properties of Chas. Forde's Bile Beans, and I was advised to take a course. Well, to my great delight, I began to improve gradually with each box, and after a thorough course of the Beans, I felt quite a different being. To-day I am, as you can see for yourself, enjoying the best of health. I am able to eat my food, and always feel ready for my meals, never feeling any of the ill effects I used to have. I wouldn't be without Bile Beans in my house on any account. I firmly believe that they alone are responsible for my cure. Other medicines did me no good at all. I am all right now—in fact, I never felt better in my life. There are many people about this neighbourhood who have been acquainted with my case, and who will tell you that every word I have said is true."

Cures equally as astonishing as Mr. Hewitt's are constantly being performed by Chas. Forde's Bile Beans for Biliousness. They are absolutely unequalled for indigestion, liver and kidney disorders, constipation, piles, debility, nervousness, female ailments, anemia, headache, pimples, face sores, colds, chill, rheumatism, pains in the chest, sleeplessness, palpitation, the after-effects of influenza, and blood impurities. All chemists stock Bile Beans, or you may obtain post free from the Bile Bean Manufacturing Co., 119, and 120, London Wall,

London, E.C., by sending price 1s. 1½d. or 2s. 9d. per box (2s. 9d. box contains 3 times 1s. 1½d.).

The Bile Bean Manufacturing Co., will send you a free sample of Bile Beans if you forward this coupon to their Central Distributing Depot, Greek Street, Leeds (Yorks.), along with full name and address and a penny stamp to pay return postage.

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COUPON.  
"LONDON READER,"  
JAN. 18.

## Gems

EMPLOYEES, make every occasion a great occasion, for you never can tell who may be taking your measure for a higher place.

It is the bounden duty of every man to look his affairs in the face and to keep an account of his incomings and outgoings in money matters.

It is the duty of every one who regards a doctrine as true and important to do what he can towards diffusing it, leaving the result to be what it may.

NOBODY, in however obscure a station, can be uniformly sincere, patient, gentle and conscientious without exerting a positive influence on friends and neighbours.

It is hard, but not impossible, to break up a bad habit and to form a good one, even late in life. It is always a mistake to underrate the difficulty, and to imagine that only a single strong resolution is necessary. That indeed is essential; but there must also be patient, watchful, earnest, continuous effort, persevered in, and not suffered to flag, through much discouragement and many failures.

## Statistics

THE RECORD HERRING SEASON.—The North Sea herring voyage, which closes each year a few days before Christmas, has beaten all records this season. Since the beginning of September, when the fishing commences, 28,666 lasts of herring have been landed at Yarmouth. A last consists of 13,200 fish, so that over 378,000,000 herring have passed over the Yarmouth fish wharf during the past three months. In spite of the magnitude of the supply prices have been better than usual, and the average earnings of each boat have been from £1,000 to £1,200. One boat, the highest reported, has earned £2,000, and the lowest notified so far is £700.

DIVORCE IN SCOTLAND.—The year just closed shows a marked increase over its predecessor in the number of divorce and separation cases tried in the Court of Session. With the exception of the total in 1899, when 222 cases were recorded, the figures for the last twelve months, 206, are highest of the past decade. In 1891 the cases numbered 143; in 1892, 149; in 1893, 150; in 1894, 139; in 1895, 165; in 1896, 184; in 1897, 198; in 1899, 222; and in 1900, 178.

## A QUESTION.

What cometh out of the night,  
Wind of the sea?  
The night of the Unknown Future—  
What cometh to me?  
Is it life? Is it love? Is it sorrow,  
Sadness, and pain?  
The dawn of a fair Tomorrow,  
Or mist and rain?

Is it wealth and ease and pleasure?  
Ah! who can say?  
Sunshine and shade are behind me,  
Blue skies and gray.  
Is it darkness or light that is winging  
Its way to me?  
What is the Future bringing,  
Wind of the sea?

C. S. P.

## Helpful Talks

BY THE EDITOR.

*The Editor is pleased to hear from his readers at any time.*

*All letters must give the name and address of the writers, not for publication, but as a guarantee of good faith.*

**AN IRISH GIRL.**—Concealment is always bad in such cases. However, under the circumstances, you have not done anything very wrong. You ought to persuade your lover to acknowledge your engagement openly at least six months before the wedding.

**E. B.**—Considering that he had made a full confession and asked your forgiveness, perhaps you were just a little too harsh with him. If he loves only you, as he declared was the case, he will be apt to call and repeat the declaration, and then you can make amends for your harshness.

**H. M. B.**—Probably she could, unless you have something from her in writing to show that she refused to let you pay her attention any longer. Your love-letters to her, with nothing but your unsupported word to offset them, would be apt to win a verdict in her favour.

**QUEENIE.**—A young lady who cannot tell when a gentleman loves her is not worthy of the attentions paid her, and should be condemned to a life of single-blessedness. Women do not need to be guided by any rules in such cases; their intuitive wisdom always teaches them the exact moment when they have rendered their adorers abject slaves to their will.

**UNHAPPY WIFE.**—It would be best for you to condone the indiscretion and give your husband the opportunity to reform. You say that he appears really penitent; he should be given the chance to redeem himself. It would not be wise to appeal to the law until calm reasoning has failed to arouse his sense of honour. You are wise in keeping the matter secret, because injudicious friends would be likely to advise you to air your troubles in Court.

**SOPHIE.**—Unless a lady is engaged to marry a gentleman she has no right to expect him to be continually dancing attendance upon her. On the occasion referred to he doubtless discovered that she was jealous, and therefore endeavoured to tease her by appearing to be very attentive to another lady. She should not allow such a trifling affair to lead her into the belief that he does not love her. When he has asked for her hand and becomes her accepted lover, she can then demand that all promiscuous flirting shall cease.

**NUMISMATICS.**—The very best sealing-wax should be used in taking proof impressions of seals and stamps. It should be melted by the flame of an alcohol-lamp, thus avoiding all tendency to blacken the wax, and carefully worked on the surface to which it is applied until perfectly even. Then the stamp is firmly and evenly pressed into it. When it is desired, a beautiful dead appearance may be given to the impression by dusting the stamp, before using it, with a little finely-powdered colour of the same tint as the wax—thus, powdered vermilion for vermilion sealing-wax.

**DOLLY.**—Under ordinary circumstances, clandestine meetings should be frowned down by all well-meaning people, as they generally lead to the most unhappy results. Very often unprincipled persons resort to this means of holding communication with ladies, because they would not be recognised or tolerated in decent society. My advice to young girls is to shun all advances made by men who, on one plea or another, endeavour to persuade them to meet them in this manner. Boarding-school authorities are always on the alert for these veritable wolves in sheep's clothing, and therefore enact the most stringent rules for the government of their charges in this respect.

**A MOTHER.**—I am sorry that I cannot give you a recipe for an "inward remedy" for chilblains, as I never prescribe for ailments requiring medicines of any kind whatever.

**ENGAGED.**—A suitable present for a gentleman would be a good book, a dozen white pocket-handkerchiefs with his initials on them, by the lady's hand, a writing-case, or anything within the line of life to the parties, is proper. He will not raise questions about its fitness.

**MAURICE.**—Such a letter as you propose writing would be no breach of propriety, as you have been on terms of intimacy with the lady for a long period. Still, it would be more advisable to declare your regard verbally. Then, if she appeared pleased with the oral announcement of your esteem and affection, it would give you courage to proceed more ardently, and perhaps elicit a prompt reciprocation.

**CETILE.**—If you love the young man well enough to become his wife, and there is no other objection to marrying him except the difference of religious opinion, that should not cause you any discord. Be married by the priest if he so desires, and after you are married respect his beliefs and avoid argument and controversy about creeds. Nothing is more useless and disagreeable.

**CARRIE.**—You should not worry over your natural bashfulness in society. Bashfulness is far preferable to boldness, and the modest maiden is, as a rule, more admired than the over-confident damsel who is eager to air her opinions. The timidity which at present distresses you will be gradually overcome when you have had more experience in social gatherings. It is a mistake to think that you are expected to be fluent in conversation; on the contrary, people like a good listener, and young girls cannot do better than listen to the conversation of more experienced members of society; by so doing they will soon acquire a knowledge of how to comport themselves, and learn to converse freely, easily, and naturally.

**H. MEIER.**—A monument to a pig was really erected, years ago, in the Hotel de Ville, at Luneburg, in Hanover, Prussia, by the inhabitants of that town. The strange memorial was in the form of a mausoleum, and contained a large glass case in which was hermetically inclosed a fine ham cut from the animal, whose memory was to be handed down to posterity. Above was a handsome slab of black marble, on which, engraved in letters of gold, was an inscription in Latin, which may be thus translated:—"Passers-by, contemplate here the mortal remains of the pig which acquired for itself imperishable glory by the discovery of the salt spring of Luneburg."

**MARION.**—The preparation to become an Army "Sister," as she is called, is first of all three years' training in a general hospital, then, having obtained the necessary certificate, the nurse sends her application to Netley, or to the Army Medical Department. If accepted, she goes to Netley for six months as a probationer, then, if the report as to conduct and efficiency is satisfactory, she is sent to a station hospital, either at Aldershot, the Curragh, or any large military depot. Applicants must be ladies by birth and education. The salary is small, but a pension is allowed on retiring from illness or when their term of service is expired.

**HOUSEKEEPER.**—To make apple pudding, take half a pound of suet paste, one and a half pounds of apples; sugar to taste; one small teaspoonful of grated or chopped lemon peel, and the juice of one lemon. Butter a pudding-basin and line it with paste; pare, core, and cut up the apples, and fill the basin with them, add the sugar, lemon peel and juice, cover with crust, and pinch the edges together. Flour a cloth and tie it securely over the pudding; put it in boiling water, so that the pudding will be well covered. Let it boil for two hours; turn it out of the basin, and serve very hot. Be sure in cooking that the pudding is always covered with water and never stops boiling.

**RENÉE.**—There is no way to make your eyes really larger. You can touch up the eyelashes with *pâte brun* and a camel's-hair brush, and put a faint, dark line just under the rim of the lower lid. This is called making up your eyes, but it must be cleverly done to escape detection in daytime. You can darken your brows with the *pâte brun*, which is a dark-brown stub, sold in little cakes by beauty artists. Some girls use a pencil, a bit of burnt cork, or a burnt match for the same purpose. Belladonna will dilate the pupil of the eye and make the eye seem larger, darker, and more brilliant, but also it injures the sight.

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A. L. T.—It would be extreme folly for you to marry a man addicted to intemperate habits. If he really loves you better than he loves liquor he will require little urging to manifest his affection and respect by promptly shunning alcoholic stimulants. Rash, indeed, would be your experiment to reform him after marriage. In case of failure, your future would be rendered extremely unhappy.

P. RYAN.—The word "rival" is from the Latin word "rivulus," meaning a rivulet or brook. It was first applied in its present sense to contentious settlers who had taken up their respective abodes on opposite sides of a rivulet, each claiming priority of right to the water. From this event the word has since signified contestants for any desired object.

L. B.—It would be advisable for you to hint to the young man that an evening visit should not, as a rule, extend beyond ten or half-past ten o'clock. A decorous young lady should insist on her visitor respecting this rule.

MARION.—This recipe for stewed rabbit is simple and satisfactory. The ingredients are one rabbit, two large onions, six cloves, one small teaspoonful of chopped lemon peel, a few forcemeat balls, and one large tablespoonful of mushroom ketchup. Cut the rabbit into small joints, put them into a stewpan, add the onions sliced, the cloves, and lemon peel. Pour in sufficient water to cover the rabbit, and, when the meat is nearly done, drop in a few forcemeat balls. Thicken the gravy with flour, put in the ketchup, boil up, and serve.

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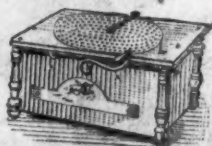
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